PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF MOHAMED BOUDIAF - M'SILA

FACULTY OF LETTERS AND LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF LETTERS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE
N°:……..



DOMAIN: FOREIGN LANGUAGES
STREAM: ENGLISH LANGUAGE
OPTION: LITERATURE & CIVILIZATION

Decolonizing the Land: Eco-Resistance and Environmental Reclamation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010)

Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree in
Literature and Civilisation

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Declaration

We hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Decolonizing the Land: Eco-Resistance and Environmental Reclamation in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010)” is our own work and all the sources we have acknowledged by means of references.

Signature:

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Dedication

To all my selves and their witnesses, near or afar.

And to every soul and soil bearing colonialism's scar.

Imane Ouaoua

For the future me

I come unyielding

I punctured the soil

I come a tree of Eden

M. El-Moatassim Allaoua

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Acknowledgments

"And my success is not but through Allah. Upon Him I have relied, and to Him I return."

(Qur' an 11:88)

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. First and foremost, we extend our deepest gratitude to Allah SWT for granting us the strength, patience, and perseverance to navigate through this journey. His guidance has been a constant source of comfort, particularly during the most challenging times.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to our supervisor, Dr. Abla Ahmed Kadi, whose invaluable support and encouragement have been instrumental in shaping this work.

Our sincere appreciation goes to the esteemed board of examiners for their valuable time, insightful comments, and constructive evaluation of this work. Your expertise and feedback will contribute significantly to the refinement of this research.

We would also like to express our heartfelt thanks to all the lecturers in our Department. Your support, knowledge, and encouragement have played a significant role in shaping our academic journey. We are truly grateful for the wisdom you have imparted and the guidance you have provided throughout our time here.

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Abstract

This study examines eco-resistance and environmental reclamation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water (2010).* It aims to analyze land as a site of identity and resistance in the context of the Niger Delta, and not only a commodified space of imperial profit. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism as theorized by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," and Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the analysis focuses on how Habila's novel exposes the ecological and human costs of oil extraction through the journeys of two Port Harcourt journalists, Rufus and Zaq, who traverse a devastated Niger Delta in search of a kidnapped British woman. The research shows that the Niger Delta is a site of slow and increasing destruction where neocolonial forces systematically prioritize corporate profit over human and ecological welfare. It also shows that militancy and the sabotage of oil infrastructure are a form of ecological protest and land reclamation. It further shows that storytelling, rituals, and intergenerational ecological knowledge are powerful tools of resistance. This study contributes to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism by bridging the gap between environmental literature and postcolonial studies within the context of contemporary African literature, specifically by showing that active eco-resistance is not only a reflection of trauma and suffering but an essential part of reclaiming and decolonising the land.

Keywords: *Eco-resistance, environmental reclamation, postcolonial ecocriticism, Niger Delta, corporate imperialism, Oil on Water*.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Colonization has often been discussed in political and cultural contexts. However, it can extend beyond these dimensions to encompass the systematic control and exploitation of land and natural resources. Colonialism did not value the communities inhabiting the land because territories were reorganized into reservoirs of raw materials, making the land valuable only in terms of what could be extracted from it. Therefore, the value of the land became inseparable from the resources it could yield. This colonial extractivist logic continues to turn geographies into commodities, making ecosystems mere instruments of imperial profit.

In the Niger Delta, this extractive logic persists in the oil industry, where land and water have been defined only by the petroleum beneath them. The region has long been marked by gas flares, military presence, and recurring oil spills that have altered everyday life. Although Nigeria achieved political independence in 1960, the system governing oil extraction reflects the continuity of colonial rule. In this context, ecological degradation becomes a manifestation of neocolonial control over land.

In the so-called Anthropocene, the development of wealthy nations has often come at the cost of the Global South's environments. These dynamics are present today in the oil-rich Niger Delta. For decades, multinational oil extraction has generated most of Nigeria's export income, yet left local communities impoverished, polluted, and unstable. As Ibekwe and Chidiobi report, the "post-colonial Niger Delta region has never known peace ever since oil exploitation began," even though "over 90% of the country's revenue (GDP) is being generated by oil exploitation from the region" (373). Meanwhile, villagers suffer from chronic gas flaring and frequent oil spills in the Delta, contaminating rivers and farmlands and fueling violent conflicts.

These harsh conditions have not remained confined to political or economic contexts. Instead, this "oil curse" has become a central struggle for the region, inspiring writers and activists to challenge neocolonial resource control. Helon Habila was born in 1967. His works

tackle the environmental, political, and social conflicts that have shaped contemporary Nigeria. In *Oil on Water*, he focuses on the Niger Delta crisis, unveiling the ecological and human costs of oil exploitation through the vivid imagery and nonlinear narration that reflect the region's chaos as well as the social and environmental decay caused by oil exploitation. Rufus and Zaq are two Port Harcourt journalists who decide to embark on a journey to track militants who have kidnapped the wife of a British oil executive. The story slowly unfolds, revealing widespread pollution and social breakdown in the region caused by oil exploitation. *Oil on Water*, therefore, contributes to global awareness of Nigeria's environmental, political, and social challenges, which secures Habila's place as a major voice in contemporary African literature.

Although Nigeria achieved political independence, the Niger Delta remains subjected to an extractivist system that reduces land to a reservoir of petroleum that keeps perpetuating colonial patterns of control. While Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* vividly portrays the pollution, violence, and social fragmentation shaping the Niger Delta, there remains insufficient critical attention to how the novel conceptualizes eco-resistance and environmental reclamation as decolonial practices that challenge extractivist domination. Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the need to examine how the narrative reimagines land not as a commodified space of imperial profit but as a contested site of identity and resistance, thereby framing ecological struggle as an essential dimension of decolonizing both territory and consciousness.

This study attempts to provide answers to the following main question: How does Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* portray eco-resistance as a form of decolonial practice in the Niger Delta? To answer this central question, the study will address the following sub-questions: How does the novel depict the environmental and social impact of oil exploitation? In what ways do the characters and communities engage in acts of resistance against environmental

destruction and the forces of neocolonial exploitation? How does the narrative engage in environmental reclamation?

This study aims to examine how Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* portrays eco-resistance and environmental reclamation as forms of decolonial practice in the Niger Delta. It also looks into the environmental impact of oil exploitation and how communities resist destruction and reclaim the land. The study aims to demonstrate how the novel provides a literary lens for understanding the links between environmental justice, local agency, and postcolonial power structures.

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has earned significant scholarly attention. In their article "Ecofeminist issues in Helon Habila's novel Oil on Water," Nigus Michael and Abiye Daniel argue that the oppression of women and nature are interconnected in the novel. The authors say that the serious destruction caused by multinational oil corporations has devastated the Niger Delta, putting the whole ecosystem in danger. As a result, this ecological destruction eventually mirrors the patriarchal exploitation of women who end up being "raped, brutalized, strangled, stabbed, impregnated, and killed" (216). They also show that the oppression of women and the subjugation of the earth are directly connected to colonialism and capitalistic greed. Therefore, Habila's novel effectively critiques how vulnerable groups are oppressed under a postcolonial environmental crisis. Mary J.N Okolie and Ogochkwu Ukwueze also examined the novel through an ecofeminist lens. In their article "Women, Agency, and the Environment in Helon Habila's Oil on Water and Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow," they examine the intersection of gender inequality and environmental crisis in the Niger Delta through a comparative analysis of novels *Oil on Water* and *Yellow Yellow*. In their study, they uncover the subtle ways in which women assert agency. They also argue that "women are always co-sufferers with the environment" (213), which forces them to reclaim their visibility through subtle forms of civic dissent. Together, these ecofeminist studies reveal how *Oil on*

Water links the exploitation of women and the degradation of the environment to shared structures of colonial and capitalist domination.

Other studies on the novel provide a linguistic and structural examination of Helon Habila's novel in an attempt to unveil the author's technical choices and how they shape the meaning of the narrative. In his article "A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Helon Habila Oil on Water", Eventus Edem examines how meaning is negotiated through the use of some cohesive devices in the text, such as reiteration, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy, which improve the textual quality of the text. The study concludes that these devices help the reader to understand the text easily and meaningfully. Another study, "A Literary Analysis of Helon Habila's Oil on Water's voice devices," explores the concept of vocalized perspectives and how different character voices project the author's perspective and beliefs. The researchers reveal Habila's stance and opinions on environmental destruction, militancy, and the ethics of journalism by categorizing instances of voice mash, crash, and trash. These papers show how linguistic patterns bridge between the writer's mental framework and the reader's understanding of reality and how lexical and pragmatic strategies are crucial in understanding the complex landscape of the Niger Delta.

Scholars analyzing *Oil on Water* have also examined the relation between environmental degradation and trauma. In their article "Helon Habila and the Trauma of Disposable People in Oil on Water," Uchenna Ohagwam and Ndubuisi Ogbuagu use trauma theory and ecocriticism to examine how environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is a form of slow violence that inflicts lasting psychological wounds on land and people. They also use the concept of "disposable people" to highlight how marginalized individuals suffer from the effects of oil pollution and militancy in the region. The study, therefore, frames the crisis in the Niger Delta as a deep psychological and cultural trauma. In another study, "Aggression: A Traumatic Augury in Helon Habila's Oil on Water," Ilechukwu examines the

intersection of trauma and aggression within Helon Habila's novel. She identifies two forms of aggression: Hostile aggression, which serves for personal and environmental pain, and instrumental aggression, a calculated strategy used by some characters to attain specific financial or political goals. The study also argues that the ecological disaster caused by multinational companies and the Nigerian state results in displacement and a sense of endangerment, which ultimately affects the human psyche and triggers a cycle of violence. Together, these trauma-centered readings highlight the devastating psychological and environmental consequences of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta.

Other studies analyze Helon Habila's novel through the critical lens of ecocriticism and postcolonialism. Mukesk Kumar Meena analyzes *Oil on Water* through ecocriticism and neocolonialism, arguing that the novel exposes multinational oil corporations as neocolonial forces that cause environmental degradation and social disaster in the Niger Delta. Meena also highlights the slow violence inherent in the pollution of the region, which destroys people's livelihoods, forcing them into abject poverty. The study concludes that the novel's narrative functions as literary environmental activism that helps raise eco-consciousness and advocate environmental justice. In contrast, Koubli Nouanwa examines the text as a postcolonial conflict, with a focus on "colonizing violence" and "decolonizing violence." Nouwana argues that the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies use state-sanctioned violence to terrorize the population and facilitate the theft of natural resources. Together, these studies suggest that true decolonization requires both ecological restoration and the reclamation of economic power.

As discussed before, scholarship on *Oil on Water* has largely focused on environmental destruction, trauma, gender oppression, and neocolonial violence in the Niger Delta. While these studies expose the different forms of exploitation, they focus more on suffering and not

on resistance. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by examining eco-resistance as a form of environmental reclamation in the novel.

A qualitative approach is employed in this study, anchored within thematic analysis to examine the representation of ecological resistance and environmental reclamation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010). The qualitative method is appropriate, as it provides effective assessment and comprehensive examination of the focus of the study.

This study utilizes an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that merges Postcolonial Ecocriticism , Nixon's concept of "slow violence", and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. While Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin provide postcolonial ecocriticism through which an examination of environmental exploitation in colonies is conducted, Edward Said's *Orientalism* presents a helpful discursive interrogation of the neo-imperial power prominent in the Niger Delta. Additionally, Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" allows for an environmentalist analysis of the ecological degradation in *Oil on Water* as a hidden and gradual ecological threat that directly harms marginalized communities.

In this study, the significance lies within its contribution to the literary society in general and to the understanding of the ecological and postcolonial discourse in African literature specifically. The study could bridge the gap between environmental literature and postcolonial studies, presenting a rigorous understanding of the impact of neo/petro colonialism on people and land alike. The interdisciplinary and multifaceted nature of the study, therefore, will uncover new dimensions to the overall interpretation of the contemporary African literature.

This study is divided into two chapters, The first chapter traces the origins and key concepts of ecocriticism, examines the interdependence between human societies and their natural environments, and charts the transition from traditional ecocriticism toward a politically grounded framework of environmental justice. It further introduces Rob Nixon's

concept of “slow violence” as a critical tool for understanding the hidden and gradual nature of ecological destruction, It also addresses the postcolonial dimensions of land through the work of theorists such as Huggan, Tiffin, and Said. The chapter concludes by situating the Niger Delta within this theoretical landscape, detailing the environmental devastation wrought by oil extraction and the militant and civil resistance it has generated.

The second chapter applies this theoretical framework to a close reading of the novel across three interconnected dimensions. It first examines how Habila renders slow violence legible through the contamination of water, toxic air, the destruction of ecosystems, and the displacement of communities. It then analyzes the role of oil companies and the postcolonial state as neocolonial forces that commodify land and suppress resistance. Finally, it explores how eco-resistance manifests in the novel through both militant action and cultural practices, including storytelling, sacred ritual, and intergenerational ecological knowledge, demonstrating how these practices collectively constitute a literary project of environmental reclamation and decolonization.

CHAPTER ONE

Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Politics of Environmental Decolonization

Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, accentuating human–nature interdependence and the literary representation of the environmental crises. It demonstrates how marginalised communities are affected by the uneven distribution of environmental risks and how Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" sheds light upon the hidden, gradual nature of this destruction and damage inflicted by the presence of harmful substances on the well-being of humans and the environment.

The connection between ecocriticism and postcolonial theory established here reveals that environmental degradation is ingrained in histories of colonialism, resource extraction, and corporate power. The chapter also engages with the intersection of Edward Said's Orientalism and ecocritical thought, illustrating how dominant systems construct and exploit the land and people alike. Furthermore, it closely examines how land has transformed into a site of resistance through its commodification under colonial and neocolonial systems where dispossessed communities assert their sovereignty through activism, narrative, and militant struggle. Lastly, the chapter discusses how the case of the Niger Delta environmental devastation permits rise to both political activism and armed resistance and reinforces the deeply political nature of this ecological crisis and the urgency of reading it through a postcolonial ecocritical lens.

1.1. Ecocriticism: Origins and Key Concepts

The ecological crisis that came to define the second half of the twentieth century is the backdrop of which the emergence of ecocriticism must be understood against. The environmental movement that introduced itself during the late 1950s slowly shifted the public opinion's attention towards their natural surroundings and away from resource-focused development (Hays 219). Simultaneously, industrial expansion, intensive resource extraction, widespread deforestation, and the rapidly increasing contamination of air, water, and soil were

conditions that could no longer be ignored within the intellectual and cultural discourse. Additionally, following the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, the environmental movement gained extreme political momentum and even more social attraction, which provided the general cultural audience with an alternative perspective that the environmental destruction was not merely a scientific hypothesis but a cultural and a political issue, one that is integral to the human nature and attitude towards the natural world (Griswold 1).

It is within this context of ecological urgency, growing environmental crisis, and the shifting of cultural consciousness that the literary scholarship came into addressing the potential relationship between environment and literature and, most importantly, questioned its basis, values, and limits. However, the process did not immediately consolidate into a single unified critical theory. For the most part of the twentieth century, the world of literary theory was dominated by the likes of structuralism, psychoanalysis, and Marxist criticism, addressing questions of language, subjectivity, and class, but no real systematic literary endeavor was conducted on the nonhuman environment as a category of critical concern.

Though, in order to understand the essence of ecocriticism, it is important to first trace back and examine the precursors to its emergence, and in that regard, numerous works can be nominated. Most notably, Joseph Meeker's term "literary ecology," defined as "the study of biological themes and relationships that appear in literary works" (7), was introduced in his work titled *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology,* which can be seen as a foundational text that provided a starting point to discover literature's role in the ecology of humankind. Furthermore, Leo Marx's idea of how the sudden intrusion of technology and machine (the "machine") disturbs the natural landscape (the "garden") established in his work *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* hints at themes such as industrialization and deforestation, which eventually evolved into ecocriticism.

The first formal appearance of the term "ecocriticism," however, is believed to be coined by William Rueckert in 1978, who, in his essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," introduced the term that implied "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (qtd. in Glotfelty xx). Which draws a fundamental definition of ecocriticism. The prefix originated from the Greek root *oikos*, meaning “house” or “dwelling place," and in this case, referring to the natural environment or habitat. Many literary terms use the prefix "eco," such as ecofeminism, ecomarxism, and ecofiction, to indicate that ecology is an integral dimension in relation to the other. Therefore, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty and Fromm xvii).

While most literary theories examine the relationship between writers, text, and the world, where the world means society, ecocriticism negotiates between the land and the text, the human and nonhuman, accentuating an interconnected relationship where earth is centered within literature studies. In that logic, ecocriticism perceives literature through an ecological lens where themes such as land, nature, and humankind are observable. Moreover, it examines how texts construct, challenge, or reinforce humanity's relationship with the natural world and how environmental contexts shape both literary production and cultural attitudes toward nature.

1.1.1. Human–Nature Interdependence

The relationship between human societies and their materialistic surroundings, that being the ecological setting humanity exists in, is the premise on which each one views and affects the other. Humanity's existence is exclusively dependent on the resources provided by

their environment, whereas, from a biological standpoint, ecosystems do not need humans in order to survive. Furthermore, most ecosystems are self-regulating systems maintained by internal feedback mechanisms and resilience, rather than requiring external (human) intervention (Holling 1). This inextricable and asymmetric relationship where humanity's well-being and survival and their extreme reliance on the ecological system and its services such as food, water and the stability of climate imply that the environmental degradation is a direct threat to the continuity of the humankind and that any disturbances within these services will ultimately result in negative effects to the sustainability of the human race. This dependence is not optional or replaceable at scale. Soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, water contamination, or climate imbalance will directly reduce the capacity to produce food, secure clean water, and maintain conditions compatible with human life.

Additionally, the core components of the ecological environment function not as isolated elements but as dynamic, interconnected processes which define its inner workings and provide an accurate perspective on how humans operate as a part within the ecological systems. Mainly through situating human societies within these networks rather than outside. The interdependence relationship between the human and nonhuman and that humankind and the natural environment are inseparable is evident, but it is important to note that it goes beyond superficial belief. As previously mentioned, humans rely on continuous interaction with these systems in order to sustain their survival, but at the same time, human activities such as resource extraction, industrialization, and pollution actively affect and reshape the ecological environment. This reciprocal relationship presents humankind as an integral agent within the natural world rather than a passive external domain.

1.1.2. Environmental Crisis and Literary Representation

Environmental crises have emerged as a core concern within literary studies, where literature is increasingly regarded as a form of ecological discourse through which the

complex realities of ecological degradation, pollution, and exploitation are represented, interpreted, and critiqued as opposed to functioning as a passive reflection of reality. Literature, as a mediator that translates ecological concerns into humanely graspable form, makes large-scale damage visible and concrete through narratives, imagery and settings. Ecocriticism "thus claims as its hermeneutic horizon nothing short of the literal horizon itself, the finite environment that a reader or writer occupies thanks not just to culturally coded determinants but also to natural determinants that antedate these, and will outlast them" (Love 1). Although first, it is important to ask what criterion a literary text should have to be considered affiliated with ecological discourse?

Literature representation of the biological environment goes beyond the superficial function of a setting where humans exist in and rather assumes a structurally significant role within the text. Lawrence Buell in his criterion of *what is an environmental text*, demonstrates that an environmentally oriented text foregrounds the nonhuman "as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history." (Buell 7) where the environment is depicted not as a static backdrop but as a dynamic process shaped by temporal and material transformations. Conversely "Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation." therefore challenges the anthropocentric notion by recognizing the intrinsic significance of the ecological environment and incorporating an ethical dimension in which human accountability to the environment becomes visible. These elements collectively reposition literature as a medium through which ecological relationships are articulated and examined and thus enabling it to function as a form of ecological discourse.

Furthermore, literary texts frequently move beyond depiction to offer implicit or explicit critiques of the forces driving environmental degradation. Circling back to the case of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring 1962* as a fundamental example, where it turned a problem of scientific basis in ecology into an ecological problem that widely reverberated across the

political, legal and cultural levels. Furthermore, "*Silent Spring* undertook cultural not scientific work when it strove to argue the moral case that it ought not to be." (Garrard 6) whereby it fundamentally changed the nature of the conversation regarding the environment. Greg Garrard suggests that the presentation of environmental issues often relies on literary and rhetorical strategies that make them amenable to cultural analysis, thereby positioning them within the scope of ecocritical inquiry (3).

As a result, and amidst the global ecological crisis, climate fiction (cli-fi) has emerged as a response to growing environmental dangers, both revealing and, consequently, criticizing ecological problems. Climate fiction that emerged at the onset of the twenty-first century is explicitly concerned with human-nonhuman relations and actively engaging in the cultural environmental discourse. While many scholars came to define climate fiction, it is suffice to say that climate fiction refers to "novels that depict climate change and crisis" (James and Morel 170). As opposed to its counterpart, which is science fiction, where the world is set in a dystopian apocalyptic future. Climate fiction, in part, asserts that the very dystopia is within the present time and "that would once have been called science fiction can be read as social realism" (Kormann). Furthermore, features previously reserved for speculative or dystopian fiction such as radical weather shifts, mass extinctions, or resource wars are now empirical facts of contemporary life. Thus, literature both reflects and challenges societal attitudes toward these issues, serving as a powerful tool for cultural change and fostering a broader understanding of environmental justice and the need for action.

1.2. From Ecocriticism to Environmental Justice

The transition from traditional ecocriticism to a more politically situated framework of environmental justice marks a critical evolution in environmental scholarship, shifting the focus from the aesthetic representation of nature to a rigorous base for structural critique. This paradigm shift recognizes that human liberation is inseparable from ecological health and

requires an environmental ethic where social, economic, and environmental justice are treated as "parts of the same whole" (Curtin 7) Consequently, the following titles will examine the systemic disparities of environmental inequality, the attritional suffering theorised as "slow violence", and the devastating intersections of toxicity, extraction, and corporate power. By moving toward an environmental justice framework, the discourse grounds itself in the material consequences of neocolonial exploitation, providing the necessary tools to analyse the ecological resistance inherent in reclaiming the land.

1.2.1. Environmental Inequality

In a vastly ecologically diverse world, humans in their communities have both suffered and enjoyed what their environment provides or has come to provide. Environmental inequality emphasizes that environmental harm or sustainability are neither evenly distributed nor socially neutral. The reciprocal relationship between humankind and their environment often imposes an asymmetrical power distribution within the human sociostructure due to the unequal ecological privileges. While inequality, as a concept, is well understood, environmental inequality, however, assigns a new dimension to that concept, one that sheds light upon marginalized communities affected by ecological peril.

Fundamentally, environmental inequality refers to the uneven distribution of environmental risks and benefits across different social groups, where marginalized communities are disproportionately exposed to ecological harm while more privileged populations enjoy access to safer and healthier environments (Pellow 582). Simultaneously, and contrary to the notion that environmental inequality is incidental, it is a form of social inequality expressed through environmental harm, one that is rooted in modernity and the systematic structure of wealth and power distributions. Ecological harm, therefore, is generated through the normal operations of political and economic systems, and its impacts

are distributed unevenly along pre-existing lines of wealth and power, thereby reproducing broader social inequalities (Szasz and Meuser 115–116).

In the light of this postcolonial age where the conditions of the global socio-economic stage are painted as new, they foreshadow historical connection between colonial expansion and capitalism production. These circumstances of globalisation, inevitably and intentionally, “produce uneven development” across the historical world to pave the path “for favourable conditions of international trade” (Huggan and Tiffin 30). Therefore, under global capitalism, there is an evidently uneven development whereby ecological problems are moved from their original source to a "foreign" location. This process is intrinsically linked to environmental racism, a term stated by Huggan and Tiffin as the third form of ecological imperialism.

Environmental racism in essence is “the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other" (Curtin 145). In function, it stems from 'hegemonic centrism,' where the ideological devaluation of marginalized races provides the practical justification for dumping ecological hazards on their doorsteps, thereby ensuring that the exploitation of the land and the oppression of its people remain inextricably linked (Huggan and Tiffin 4).

Most importantly, the dissonance between those who benefit from sustained clean resources and those who suffer from environmental degradation is a systematic byproduct of how power is organized. The dominant communities maintain the cleanliness of their environment by exporting the dirty aspects of their lifestyles. This externalization of harm is manifested, for instance, in the physical re-routing of toxic waste to regions that lack the political power to refuse it. Additionally, marginalized groups are often ideologically "dehumanized" or seen as a part of the natural landscape (Huggan and Tiffin 6). This allows for their lands to be treated as "empty" or "underused," justifying the extraction of wealth while leaving behind the pollution.

1.2.2. Rob Nixon's "Slow Violence"

Rob Nixon, in his book titled *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, redefines the conceptual image of violence and strips the immediacy often fundamentally connected to it and rather assigns it an attritional, time-delayed force that eludes conventional representation. By severing the concept of violence from its instantaneous element, Nixon exposes the hidden suffering and gradual environmental destruction.

This modern world is characterized by its addiction to violent events that are immediate, explosive, and sensational, such as terrorist attacks or volcanic eruptions. The absence of the "instant spectacle" causes the gradual environmental destruction to be overlooked (9). Therefore, slow violence, a term coined by Nixon, can be defined as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." Thus, it is not a single event but a continuous long-term process of attrition. Climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, and many other instances where "slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles" (2) can directly obstruct the process of mitigating them. Because these crises lack a "punctual" moment of explosion, they often fail to meet the criteria for what news media or political systems recognize as a crisis. This, paired with the gradualism of slow violence, directly contributes to disregarding the impact of such ecological crises.

The victims of slow violence are often the "environmentally dispossessed" marginalized communities whose stories do not fit the high-speed requirements of "the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world" (3). As a consequence, the invisibility of the suffering caused by slow violence is not physically visceral nor easy to communicate. It is "invisible" because the casualties are often postponed for decades, making it difficult to link the cause (oil spills/pollution) to the effect (illness/death).

In addition, when communities raise awareness about their ecological predicaments, often not officially acknowledged, they become a target to the well-funded corporations "that have a legal or commercial interest in manufacturing and disseminating doubt" (16), because the suffering is invisible and cumulative, it is easier for powerful interests to claim that a specific cancer cluster or crop failure cannot be definitively proven to stem from their specific environmental impact. Making time "the ultimate cover-up, a dependable ally in camouflaging "smart" warfare's sprawling toll" (210) where deaths do not happen instantly as in during an explosion or a storm, but instead, occur over years or decades due to ecological degradation. Nixon refers to this concept as the long dyings, "the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological, that result from war's toxic aftermaths or climate change" (2).

Most importantly, slow violence often exceeds, as a characteristic, attrition to the point of becoming "exponential, operating as a major threat multiplier; it can fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded" (3). As ecosystems degrade, they gradually lose the ability to recover, which consequently causes the destruction to move faster creating conditions for other types of violence to multiply. For instance, if the water supply of a certain region degrades due to oil spillage or climate change, slow violence will eventually trigger a fast military conflict over the remaining sources.

1.2.3. Toxicity, Extraction, and Corporate Power

The environmental crisis in the broader sense and in postcolonial ecocriticism is not merely ecological in origin, but rather it is inseparable from structures of corporate power and the ideologies that sustain them. In a postnatural world where the culture shifted from being defined by its production to one defined by its waste, the presence of environmental threats such as oil spills, chemical pollution, contaminated water, toxic air emissions, and the damage

inflicted by their presence becomes the direct evidence of the system in question. In this natural setting characterized by its "commodified representation" (Glotfelty and Fromm xxx), it is important to address the harm that these major environmental threats inflict upon human health and natural environments.

The material consequences of environmental toxicity are both severe and widespread, directly affecting human health and ecological systems. Drawing from the statistics reported by The Lancet Commission on pollution and health, which estimates that pollution is responsible for around nine million premature deaths annually, corresponding to one in six deaths worldwide. That is by definition the "unwanted waste of human origin released to air, land, water, and the ocean without regard for cost or consequence" (Fuller et al. 1). The health consequences of such exposure are extensive, as pollution has been directly associated with cardiovascular diseases, respiratory disorders, cancer, and neurological damage, illustrating how environmental toxicity operates not only at the ecological level but also at the level of the human body. causing diseases like cancer, cardiovascular, reproductive, prenatal central nervous system, and respiratory health issues (Shetty et al. 2).

While these figures demonstrate the gravity of the crisis, the underlying causes remain intrinsically linked to industrial processes. Particularly the industrial processes of resource extraction, typically involving clearing large areas of land and chemical waste disposal , which consequently contribute to large-scale environmental degradation such as soil erosion and contamination, toxic air emissions, and water contamination (Johnston et al. 8–12). Simultaneously, habitat loss is a notable result of resource extraction. Specifically, fragmentation, which refers to "the division of habitat into smaller and more isolated fragments separated by a matrix of human-transformed land cover" (Haddad et al. 1), leading to the loss of biodiversity, extinction debt, and elimination of livelihoods.

The interlocking mechanisms that define the relationship between corporations, resource extraction, and government policy are one of the most consequential dynamics that shape ecological conditions. Firstly, the corporate concept of the “trade-offs” rhetoric reveals a worldview in which clean air and intact ecosystems are treated as luxuries that must compete with "necessities," where “one sacrifices the ‘luxury’ of an uncontaminated environment in order to permit economic ‘progress’ ” (Glotfelty and Fromm 36). It reflects that industrial production defines what counts as necessary. Second, Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” indicates how corporations influence government policy. Because the effect of resource extraction does not fit the “spectacular” nature of news cycles or the immediate political terms, corporations exploit this representational challenge by framing their activities as "clean" or "safe" in the short term. In addition, these corporations recruit “forces that have a legal or commercial interest in manufacturing and disseminating doubt” (Nixon 16). Similar to Robert Proctor's concept of agnotology, a strategy of manufacturing scientific uncertainty to delay regulation, subsequently adopted by fossil fuel industries.

Moreover, the mechanism at work between corporation and government policies can be conceptualized through what George Stigler argued in his 1971 paper, *The Theory of Economic Regulation,* that “every industry or occupation that has enough political power to utilize the state will seek to control entry" (5). In other words, industries with high political influence, such as oil and gas corporations, will use the state’s power to create barriers that protect their interests. This aligns with the framework of Richard Auty’s “resource curse” that refers to the phenomenon where countries rich in natural resources (like oil, gas, and minerals) tend to be underdeveloped, less democratic, and overall struggle with economic growth compared to countries with fewer resources.

1.3. Postcolonial Theory and Coloniality of Land

The conceptualization of land in postcolonial theory requires a distinction between colonization as a physical and discrete historical event and colonialism as an enduring, metaphysical power structure. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni affirms that while formal decolonization may have occurred in a juridical and political sense, the "coloniality of power" persists as an invisible matrix that continues to shape relations between the Global North and the Global South (181). This coloniality is most visible in the management and perception of land, which has been transformed from a site of ancestral belonging into a demarcated zone for resource extraction and capital accumulation. The colonial project was more than just a territorial acquisition; in fact, it was an epistemic intervention that sought to empty the native's brain and replace indigenous ontologies of the earth with Western legal and economic frameworks (185).

In the African context, the coloniality of land is rooted in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni terms the "grammar of decolonization," where the achievement of political sovereignty often masks deeper economic and cultural entrapment (31). This entrapment is sustained through colonial matrices of power that prioritize the control of the economy through seizing land and the exploitation of labor (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 48). The historical transition from pre-colonial patterns of land abundance to colonial systems of scarcity was facilitated by state interventions designed to replace price-responsive peasant farmers with coercive migrant labor systems (Austin 9). This shift was a deliberate civilizing mission that opened the African continent for economic exploitation as a form of development (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 52). Consequently, the post-colonial state eventually functions as a colonized institution, replicating the extractive logic of its predecessors and maintaining Africa’s subaltern position in the global hierarchy.

Land in colonial and postcolonial contexts is shaped by inherited power relations. Patrick Wolfe emphasizes that settler colonialism is "an inclusive, land-centered project" (393) where "settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure, not an event" (388). In Africa, colonial governments and apartheid regimes dispossessed indigenous people to establish farms, mines, and oil fields. Similarly, corporate colonialism uses transnational companies that treat land purely as an economic resource. For example, European companies and American firms have long financed oil exploration in Nigeria, Algeria, and Angola. This resulted in a mass land appropriation for drill sites and pipelines, which eventually converted land into an export commodity. This usually happened through outright land seizure and concession agreements that were often backed by force or corrupt leases, which channeled land from local use into colonial global markets. In this process, locals were excluded from decision-making, and the only things they got in return were massive environmental damage from oil spills, gas flaring, and polluted water. This colonial logic and corporate interests reduced land to a site of extraction and profit, therefore erasing any social or ecological meanings tied to it.

1.3.1. Settler and Corporate Colonialism

The evolution of land as a commodity in Africa is linked to the transition from settler colonialism to a more discrete yet pervasive form of corporate colonialism. Throughout history, settler lobbies in colonies such as Zimbabwe and Namibia created legal frameworks that stopped indigenous investment and prioritized the right for the colonizing elites to own property (Austin 2). However, in West Africa, for example, where the density of white settlement was much lower, the colonial state functioned via a "vent for surplus" model, which mobilizes land and labor to meet the industrial needs of the capital class (Austin 2). This kind of systematic exploitation has transformed into corporate colonialism, where corporations are able to exercise a degree of sovereignty that often exceeds that of the host

nation. This process reflects what David Harvey describes as “accumulation by dispossession,” whereby capitalist expansion relies on the continuous appropriation of land and resources. For example, in the Niger Delta, corporations such as Shell have engaged in extensive oil extraction activities that have resulted in severe environmental degradation, including recurrent oil spills and the destruction of local ecosystems. These practices have significantly undermined the livelihoods of indigenous communities, particularly those dependent on fishing and agriculture.

Corporate colonialism echoes the colonial mentality that treats indigenous people and lands as surplus reserves of extraction. In Africa, corporations like Shell in the Niger Delta use legal strategies that show a profound sense of impunity, as Western legal regimes often fail to hold companies accountable for any harm they cause. (Byrnes et al.). Humans have rights and responsibilities, and systems that govern each; however, standing behind the shield of corporations allows humans to evade consequences by facing a “corporate death penalty” that might include limited access to certain markets or stopping the corporation’s charter for a period of time, therefore evading the punishment of natural humans (Byrnes et al.). This structure shows how land is treated as a commodity that benefits the capitalist class instead of being treated as a living ecosystem.

Within this system of corporate colonialism, the transformation of land into a commodity involves the erasure of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and the imposition of Western scientific approaches that prioritize yield and profit over sustainability. Colonial powers viewed colonized lands as resources to be extracted, leading to deforestation, resource depletion, and the disruption of indigenous ecological systems. In the petro-economy, this commodity logic is even more extreme, as the "mindless extraction" of oil is tied to the "tightening noose of odious debt repayment," forcing the state to surrender communal lands to corporate interests to satisfy international financial obligations (qtd. in Bhandari 65).

Ultimately, corporate colonialism does not represent a break from settler colonialism but rather its transformation into a more diffuse, legally sanctioned, and less visible form of control.

1.3.2. Neo-Colonialism and Corporate Imperialism

The shift toward neo-colonialism represents what Kwame Nkrumah identified as the "final and perhaps most dangerous stage of imperialism." In this stage, a state may have all manifestations of international sovereignty, such as a flag, an anthem, and a seat in the United Nations, but all of its economic systems and political policy are directed from the outside. Instead of making sure that foreign capital is used for the authentic development of the nation, Neocolonialism functions by ensuring its usage for the exploitation of labor and resources (Nkrumah 4). The gap between poor and rich countries continues to widen as this dynamic creates a relationship based on structural dependency and financial obligation (Nkrumah 4). This is manifested in oil capitalism, especially in African petrostates, where the global power hierarchy roots run deep in the making of Western hegemony.

Corporate imperialism is the mechanism through which this neo-colonialism is exercised in the modern era. It is characterized by the concentration of economic power in a few hundred “technically dynamic, massively capitalized, and highly organized corporations” that control a growing share of the world's output (Girvan 5). These entities influence national policies and use international trade agreements in favor of powerful economies, which, as a result, create financial dependencies in nations that are less developed. This kind of global imperialism is managed by a transnational capitalist class that consists of corporate executives, globalizing state bureaucrats, technical professionals, and consumerist elites who deregulate finance at the expense of subaltern classes (Chimni 19).

This structure has a profound impact on African states. The international regulations guiding the exchange of raw materials are formulated by advanced capitalist nations to their

own advantage (Alaye and Victor 8). These nations are able to fix prices for both primary commodities and industrial products because of their exalted position in the global economic system, thereby undermining the economic sovereignty of post-colonial states (Alaye and Fakoya 8). Furthermore, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that are imposed by institutions like the World Bank often requires privatization and reduced government spending, which robs citizens of essential social services like health and education (Wellington). In this context, the post-colonial state becomes an instrument for corporate profit, where the connivance of oil companies and government agencies leads to the marginalization of its people and loss of land (Bhandari 1).

In Nigeria, neocolonialism can be clearly seen in the relationship between multinationals and the state, where economic power translates into political influence that perpetuates a cycle of dependency and underdevelopment (qtd in Yange 876). Despite generating huge revenues, such as 45.6 billion dollars generated by oil extraction in 2022, the Niger Delta region remains underdeveloped and marginalized (Yange 876). This contrast shows the exploitative nature of corporations like Shell, Chevron, Total, Eni, and Exxonmobil, which reap big profits while leaving behind environmental degradation and social inequity (Yange 876).

1.3.3. Decolonization, Eco-Resistance, and Territorial Reclamation

Decolonization in the post-colonial era necessitates a rebellion that enables formerly colonized people to gain self-confidence and reimagine a world free from Western control. For many African societies, land is a core component of identity and personhood and not just an externalized commodity. According to traditional African philosophy, an individual is defined by their “environing community," and this community includes the living, the dead, and the unborn, all of whom are tied to the ancestral land (Matolino 192). John Mbiti argues that the kinship system is a “vast network of relations” that spreads across the land, making

the individual “part of the whole." (qtd in Matolino 66) Consequently, the loss of land to corporate extraction is not merely an economic deprivation but an ontological threat and a destruction of the sacred land that sustains both the body and the spirit.

Eco resistance in this framework is a struggle for territorial reclamation and communal sovereignty. It is a multidimensional project of justice that seeks to dismantle the structural inequities of neo-colonial economic regimes (Bello and Gbede 251). This resistance often takes the form of reparations thought, which tries to envision a future of restoration for lost value and the dignity of the community (Bello and Gebede 251). In the Niger Delta, this has turned into a theater of conflict where the local collides with the global, and where the consequences of Western consumption are inscribed on the bodies of the people and the land (Omesu and Onwuka 167). Therefore, the restoration of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional forms of governance that were marginalized by colonial powers is closely tied to the success of land reclamation, as Garrad argues that this suppression resulted in the devastation of the ecology and obliteration of cultural practices connected to nature (qtd in Gayathri Devi 2).

In Nigeria, the Ogoni people famously stated their struggle in the Ogoni Bill of Rights in 1990, where they demanded control over land and oil revenue. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) exemplifies nonviolent resistance that leads to peaceful protests against Shell’s damaging extractive activities, highlighting the integrality of land to Ogoni identity. In contrast, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is a militant group that emerged in 2006, which advocated for greater control and benefits from oil production for local communities. These movements reveal how land reclamation is deeply rooted in both ecology and politics as it is shaped by decades of exploitation and neocolonial practices.

1.4. Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a recent theoretical framework that, according to Huggan and Tiffin, is difficult to define and to combine, as the two do not share many similarities in their methods or fundamental ideological concerns (2). In their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animal, Environment*, Huggan and Tiffin further explain that postcolonial frameworks are anthropocentric and pay little attention to the long history of ecological concerns in postcolonial criticism; meanwhile, ecocriticism focuses more on observing and discussing nature and the environment (3). They also discuss the huge gap between Northern and Southern environmentalisms, where the former is described as "rich (always potentially vainglorious and hypocritical)" and the latter as “environmentalism of the poor (often genuinely heroic and authentic)” and whether it is even possible to narrow the gap between the colonizer and the colonized (2). Despite these difficulties faced in reconciling these two theories, postcolonial ecocriticism is deemed necessary, as it creates space for literary analysis within global struggles for ecological justice.

Huggan and Tiffin make use of a quote by Pablo Mukherjee, which acts as a great, concise argument for the necessity of postcolonial ecocriticism: Surely, any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species (qtd in Huggan and Tiffin 2).

Therefore, according to Mukherjee, the difference between postcolonial theory and ecocriticism does not deny the fact that colonialism, nature, and culture are interlinked.

Therefore, nature and culture cannot be discussed in isolation from the political and historical situation around them, at least when discussing Southern environmentalism.

Imperialism, often understood as the control and appropriation of land and resources, is one of the main concerns of postcolonial and postcolonial ecocritical studies however, the latter adds an environmental dimension to the analysis. The term postcolonial ecocriticism was first coined by Alfred W.Crosby in his study *Ecological Imperialism.* He argues that the most visible and lasting consequence of imperial expansion was ecological (Huggan and Tiffin 3), as colonization reshaped environments through the transfer of plants, animals, and diseases. Therefore, ecological imperialism is a key mechanism through which empire operates, extending its control beyond people to the land itself.

Huggan and Tiffin present three different forms and definitions of ecological imperialism (3-4). The first one is that of Val Plumwood, which traces ecological imperialism to the Western conception of nature as "other." This view creates a gap between humans and the environment, making it eventually dispensable. Such a perspective reinforces imperial ideology because it legitimizes using land as a resource to be exploited. The second definition, referred to as bioclonisation, is more of a contemporary term that covers the implications of current Western technological experiments and trends. Examples here range from biopiracy, which is the corporate seizure of indigenous land, to Western patented genetic modification, which all work to serve Western needs and political ends. The third form is environmental racism, which was first defined by Deane Curtin. Environmental racism is a sociological phenomenon that sheds light on the environmental discrimination exercised on marginalized people and the transference of ecological problems from their homes to a foreign outlet. Helen and Tiffin further explain it by referring to Plumwood's "hegemonic centrism," where racism, sexism, and colonialism have all historically been conscripted for the purpose of exploiting nature while disregarding the rights of all people in a shared earth.

These three definitions allow a clearer understanding of how the imperial system justified environmental exploitation and transformed land and humans' relation to it.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a vital critical lens for reading literature within postcolonial contexts. It provides an optic into how environmental problems and colonial histories intersect (Gayathri Devi 1). This field recognizes that imperial powers viewed colonized lands as resources to be extracted, which leads to deforestation, resource depletion, and the displacement of indigenous people (Gayathri Devi 2). A clear demonstration of this dynamic is in the Niger Delta, where the Ogoni people struggle with the pollution and environmental degradation caused by British oil companies. These corporations are destroying rivers that are crucial to the community's life and survival. In this context, the environment can no longer be seen as a neutral or passive backdrop, as it is clearly a politically charged place. Thus, postcolonial ecocriticism highlights how ecological transformation is tied to imperial history, if not one of its central mechanisms.

1.4.1. Orientalism, Eco-Orientalism, and the Representation of Colonized Environments

The theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism cannot be complete without an account of the crucial dimension of colonial power. Colonial and neocolonial regimes do not only extract resources from the Global South; instead, they tend to produce biased knowledge about those places and people in ways that legitimize their extractive behavior. Edward Said's *Orientalism* has established the foundational argument that Western knowledge about non-Western people was a deliberate apparatus through which imperial authority was produced and sustained. According to Said, the concept of the Orient "is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either." (4) He continues to argue that the Orient was not a geographic reality but a conceptual construction that Western scholarship invented, therefore, both the "Orient and Occident are man-made." (5) The Orient, therefore, is defined as being a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories

and landscapes, remarkable experiences." (1). This definition of "the Orient has helped to define the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."(1). The political consequence of this representational structure helped position Western interventions, whether military, administrative, or commercial, as a rational response to the naivety and disorder of the non-Western world, rather than its cause.

The manifestation of this logic can be clearly seen in the domain of ecology and environment. This has given birth to what scholars have termed "eco-orientalism," which is the application of Said's orientalist framework to the representations of non-Western landscapes and ecological practices. As Cronon put it, when we gaze in the mirror, we easily imagine that what we see is Nature when in fact it is a mere reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires (7). These desires can be clearly seen in the moves taken by colonial entities. Eco-Orientalism operates through two different yet complementary moves. The first is looking at non-Western lands as pristine, pre-modern wilderness, a romanticized image of sublime nature unspoiled by industrial civilization (Cronon 7-10). This type of thinking reduces local populations to elements of nature rather than looking at them as active inhabitants of the landscape, which eventually strips them of their political agency. The second move, opposite in affect but identical in effect, constructs non-Western environments as spaces of chaos and degradation, therefore justifying social and political intervention by privileged countries (Huggan and Tiffin 29). This juxtaposition reinforces Lohman's idea that "green things and many-legged creatures, like everything else, tend to get defined in terms which suit the interests of the definer. Often they are seen simply as the opposite of, or a resource for, something more familiar." In both cases, the agency and knowledge of Indigenous people are disregarded, which allows external powers to exploit these environments.

1.4.2. Environmental Activism and Reclaiming Land through Narrative

Across Africa, environmental activism often uses storytelling and literature as tools of decolonization. These narratives offer a sophisticated appreciation of how literature speaks to nature while highlighting the social and historical forces that mold the representation of the non-human world (Gyathri Devi 1). Literature that critiques colonial environmental legacy allows colonized communities to reclaim their relationship with the land. Arundhati Roy and Ken Saro-Wiwa are “writer activists” who exemplify the “interweaving of aesthetics and politics" (O'Brien 2). Their work upsets the reductive binarism that separates writers from activism and uses narrative to gain leverage on material problems while maintaining the autonomy of the imagination, as Huggan and Tiffin insist (O’Brien 1). Contemporary poet Tanure Ojaide’s *Delata Blues and Home Songs* chronicles the Niger Delta’s transformation by oil, blending folkloric imagery with protest. According to critics, writers like Sar-Wiwa, Ojaide, and Ogaga Ifwodo explicitly “bring together insights from political ecology, ecocriticism, and environmental activism, which challenge unjust and ecologically destructive forms of imperial development" (Missihoun 2).

Narrative reclamation involves more than documenting degradation; it is about reclaiming environmental narratives that have been dominated by Western perspectives for centuries. Through narrative, land is transformed from a commodity back into a shared story. Environmental activism in Africa thus often means reclaiming land culturally, not just legally. It also strengthens identity by reinforcing the idea that ecology sustains community values, and it lays the groundwork for political claims, as a powerful story about stolen land can support legal land rights and policy change. In short, literature and testimony become weapons against the struggle of the coloniality of land, uniting past resistance with future hopes.

1.5. The Niger Delta Context

The Niger Delta is one of the largest river deltas in the world and the most significant site of oil extraction in Africa, which serves as a critical case study for examining the intersection of environmental degradation, neo-colonial exploitation, and local resistance. This mangrove wetland covers roughly 70000 square kilometers, which makes up 7.3% of Nigeria's total landmass, and has historically supported many ecosystems and livelihoods (Ordinioha and Brisibe 11). It also spans nine coastal states in southern Nigeria, through which the rivers Benue and Niger empty into the Atlantic Ocean (Ordinioha and Brisibe 11). This river is home to at least 31 million people of more than 40 ethnic groups. These inhabitants speak about 250 dialects out of 520 languages that the people throughout the country speak (Ibekwe and Chidiobi 381). Before discovering oil in the area, the economy there was simply based on fishing and farming due to the long coastline and rich mangrove swamps that supported diverse ecosystems and livelihoods. However, the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta fundamentally altered its ecological and socio-political landscape.

In this region lie Nigeria’s over 35 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (qtd in Afinotan and Ojakorotu 1). The region also contributes over 80% of Nigeria’s Gross Domestic Product, which makes it the jugular of the country (Afinotan and Ojakorotu 1). 1956 was the year in which oil was discovered in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta at Oloibiri, and exports soon began in 1958 (Ordinioha and Brisibe 11). In 2004, 2.5 million barrels of crude oil were exported every day (Ordinioha and Brisibe 11). Despite all this natural wealth, the transformation of the Niger Delta into an extractivist zone has had profound consequences on the environment and the people. 13 million barrels (1.5 million tons) of crude oil have been spilled since 1958 from over 7,000 oil spill incidents, a yearly average of about 240,000 barrels (Ordinioha and Brisibe 11). This has led the people living there to endure chronic environmental degradation. Below, we detail two key dimensions: the

physical devastation of oil extraction and the militant and civil resistance that has emerged in response.

1.5.1 Oil Extraction and Environmental Devastation

Decades of oil extraction have transformed the Niger Delta's land and water. One of the major consequences of oil extraction and the biggest contributors to environmental devastation in the Niger Delta is gas flaring. Gas flaring is ubiquitous: when oil is pumped, associated natural gas is continuously burned off. To separate crude oil from gas, oil companies use one of these three options: reinjecting the gas into the ground for future reuse, using it for domestic and commercial purposes by acquiring equipment for liquidification and transportation, or flaring the gas into the atmosphere (Agboola et al. 69). Companies widely use the latter, as it is easier and less costly. This calculated move cuts costs at the expense of the communities that live meters away from these flares. The constant exposure to these pollutants often results in severe health implications such as lung damage, skin problems, deformities in children, and even leukemia (Ovuakporaye et al. 1). In addition, gas flaring contributes directly to climate change, as the process involves the emission of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane (Agbe N. et al. 32). Acid rain is another devastating consequence of gas flaring. It acidifies lakes and streams and damages vegetation. This highlights the direct impact of industrial activities on the environment in the Niger Delta.

Access to safe and potable drinking water is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of public health, directly supporting human well-being and development (World Health Organization). However, contamination in the Niger Delta extends to drinking water and farmland. Since 1958, an estimated 13 billion barrels of crude have leaked into the Delta's rivers and creeks (Ordinioha and Brisibe 11). Nigeria's spill agency recorded 822 spills in just 2020-2021 (28,000 barrels), though true numbers may be higher. Studies find that surface and groundwater often exceed safe levels of toxic metals and oil residues

(Ordinioha and Brisibe 11). As a result, this pollution of the water bodies and farmlands has rendered farming and fishing impossible or extremely difficult, leading to malnourishment and the spread of disease (Chukwudi and Chinonso 32)

1.5.2 Militancy and Environmental Protest

Chronic injustice in the Niger Delta has been fueling militant resistance in the region as the Nigerian government and multinational corporations have failed to address the grievances of the local communities. Therefore, the youth of the Delta have turned to armed resistance to face this abuse. This insurgency, particularly between 2006 and 2009, involved the sabotage of pipelines, the kidnapping of foreign expatriates, and the bombing of government facilities (Ugor 1). The most infamous group is MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta). This group emerged around 2006, taking up arms against oil infrastructure in order for locals to get control over resources. In its first act, MEND kidnapped foreign oil workers, instantly cutting Nigeria's production by roughly one-third (Henry and Andrew 24). Between 2006 and 2007, about 100 people from Agip, Chevron, and Shell were kidnapped by militants, and the number grew to 1128 from January 2008 to January 2009 (qtd in Dimas 119). Over the next few years, MEND and affiliated groups used many strategies such as pipeline vandalism, guerrilla warfare, sabotage, oil theft/bunkering, kidnapping, abduction, etc. (qtd. in Dimas 119).

Political kidnapping and oil bunkering have become a form of resistance. It is in a way a "spectacle aimed at resisting marginalization and asserting agency" (Omesu and Onwuka 167). Militants occasionally abduct high-profile individuals (e.g., local politicians, lawyers, or oil company managers) to highlight grievances. Some might condemn these acts; however, the militants view their actions as an assertion of subaltern agency and a fight for environmental justice. The use of illegal oil bunkering is also a spatial articulation of power, where indigenous occupants reclaim the natural wealth of their territory to fund their struggle

against a neo-colonial economic regime (Ugor 4). By targeting the symbols of oil power, militants clearly highlight the connection between land and justice.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, emphasizing the interdependence between humans and nature and the role of literature in shedding light on environmental degradation. It has shown how the uneven distribution of ecological harm affected marginalized communities and how Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" reveals the hidden, gradual nature of this destruction. The link between ecocriticism and postcolonial theory in this chapter has demonstrated that environmental degradation is deeply rooted in histories of colonialism, resource extraction, and corporate power. The chapter discusses Said's Orientalism and the intersection of ecocriticism and Orientalism. It has also shown how the commodification of land under colonial and neo-colonial systems has turned it into a site of resistance. Finally, the case of the Niger Delta illustrates how environmental devastation leads to both activism and militant resistance, which further reinforces the political nature of this ecological crisis. Building on this framework, the next chapter will apply these concepts to the literary analysis of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

CHAPTER TWO

Toxic Landscapes, Resistance, and the Reclamation of the Niger Delta in Oil on Water

Introduction

Building upon the theoretical foundations established in the preceding chapter, this analytical chapter seeks to examine how Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) conceptualizes the Niger Delta as a contested geography of neocolonial exploitation and decolonial reclamation. Utilizing a postcolonial ecocritical framework, the analysis interrogates the novel's depiction of environmental crisis not as a series of isolated events, but as a manifestation of "slow violence" that structurally undermines the ontological security of marginalized communities. The chapter is organized into three primary dimensions. First, it delineates the material consequences of oil extraction, specifically focusing on how oil spills, gas flaring, and ecosystemic collapse generate invisible suffering and forced displacement. Second, it examines the continuity of colonial patterns through the lens of corporate imperialism, analyzing the tension between land viewed as a commodified resource by multinational corporations and land experienced as a sacred home by indigenous inhabitants. Finally, the chapter explores the multifaceted nature of eco-resistance, investigating how both armed militancy and the preservation of cultural knowledge through storytelling serve as essential mechanisms for reclaiming the environment and asserting communal sovereignty against the extractivist logic of petro-capitalism.

2.1 Environmental Degradation, Slow Violence and Invisible Suffering.

At its most fundamental level, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) is a novel about what cannot be seen, the prolonged, widespread, and institutionally obscured destruction wrought upon the Niger Delta through decades of petroleum extraction. To read the novel through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism is to confront a landscape whose devastation operates not through the spectacular and instantaneous violence of a single catastrophe but through slow violence that is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2). Habila translates this theoretical framework

into narrative form with striking precision, constructing a fictional geography of the Delta in which ecological collapse, human dispossession and corporatised negligence merge into a condition immune to visibility, fundamentally because of its gradual nature. The following sections examine how Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* renders this slow violence legible across four interconnected dimensions: Oil spills and the contamination of water sources. Air quality, toxicity and gas flaring. The devastation of nonhuman ecosystems and, lastly, the displacement and loss of land and livelihood. Collectively, these dimensions establish a sustained allegation of petro-capitalism as a colonial force that continues to dispossess and destroy long after formal independence.

2.1.1. Oil Spills and Contaminated Rivers.

The rivers of the Niger Delta in *Oil on Water* carry within their currents the accumulated evidence of industrial negligence and ecological disregard. They are archives of devastation as opposed to being a medium of life. From the earliest pages, Habila establishes water not as a source of sustenance or cultural identity, though it once was both, but rather reduces it to a conduit of petro-capitalism, one that is saturated with the toxic residue of extraction. The toxic contamination is widespread, sensory and unavoidable; it registers on the body before the mind. When the narrator and his companion traverse deeper into the Delta, the river becomes increasingly lifeless, its surface dissimilar to its previous life-sustaining state. Hablia writes: "Over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fish or other water creatures—we were alone" (Habila 17). In this sentence, the ecological cost of the oil industry fully announces itself: the decimation of an ecosystem and its natural habitat. Moreover, the black colour of the water is a testimony to a contamination so prevalent to the point where it has negatively altered the fundamental characteristics of the ecosystem, one that is not a part of the cycle of nature. The use of the word "expressionless" transfers the

state of affective numbness caused by constant trauma to a human being to the landscape itself, suggesting that the river has been stripped of its vigour on top of its biodiversity.

This image of biological absence is reinforced throughout the novel by the recurring motif of the dead fish, being a visible and immediate symbol of aquatic death. Further down the plot, "—When I was a boy, me and my sister, we used to catch crabs." the protagonist said, to which the girl replied, "No crabs here now. The water is not good" (Habila 29) is a sentence condensing an entire history of ecological loss into a quiet and devastating memory. What once defined the ordinary childhood routine, that being the catching of crabs, now has been rendered impossible by contamination. This is precisely the temporal spectrum of Nixon's slow violence, where the destruction is not experienced as a single spectacular event but through a series of subtractions from the environment that accumulate over years until what remains is an environment entirely unrecognisable to its inhabitants. The colloquial register of the exchange between the girl and Rufus "the water is not good" enacts the novel's strategy of letting the common and ordinary voice of the dispossessed carry the weight of the ecological tragedy, rather than relying on the emotional rhetoric of emergency that spectacular and instantaneous disasters typically generate.

Additionally, the oil spill does not announce itself, rather it suffocates, coats and seeps. The consistent imagery of contamination emphasises this smothering quality as though the defining attribute of oil's violence lies partially in its capacity to obscure and hide what lies underneath it. The image of this process could be seen with remarkable precision in this passage: "The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands" (Habila 16). The simile, clinically precise as it is, implies that the land is ageing and diseased and is breaking down from within under the pressure of prolonged toxic exposure. The image of "liver spots on a smoker's hands" typically refers to markers of biological deterioration and thus transforms the

landscape into a body in decline, one whose symptoms are visible on its surface but the internal damage runs far deeper. Habila aligns the environmental deterioration and bodily injury to make ecological damage viscerally comprehensible and morally urgent. Simultaneously, the oiled grass becomes an image of a region whose slow poisoning became a condition so chronic it no longer registers as a crisis, and rather it is rendered ordinary.

The river contamination also manifests in the physical experience of those who must navigate it on a daily basis, and in this respect, the novel presents the Delta's pollution as something that cannot be held at a distance or observed with detachment. The process of travelling through the Delta is an immersion in toxicity itself. "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 our grime-smeared faces" (Habila 16). The accumulation of external intrusions on the body, like the water in shoes and shirts, the foul smell in hair, and grime on skin construct contamination as a difficult total sensory experience, one that denies any possibility of neutral senses. To move through this landscape is to carry it on and within the body. The boundary between the human and the contaminated environment has been dissolved not by any ecological harmony but by the intruding and invasive trait of pollution. The Delta and its contamination fuse their bodies into the same system of degradation that has destroyed the ecosystem.

Habila's representation of oil contamination is particularly powerful as an act of ecological witness because it insists on the landscape's former healthy state and plenitude. The devastation is depicted more severely by the constant, often implicit, reference to what the river once held. The image of "a dead fish on the oil-polluted water" (Habila 13) observed in passing as Zaq deteriorates from fever speaks to a setting in which death has simply become the new norm. The dead fish lead to no investigation or an indication of mourning

within the narrative; it is simply noted, as one notes something unremarkable. This narrative flatness is an argument in itself, it echoes the desensitisation that results from chronic exposure to environmental damage. The point at which slow violence has rigorously normalised destruction, where the warranted response to such a crisis is eliminated. In this sense, Habila's prose style reproduced in its reader the discomfort of confronting suffering that has been rendered invisible.

2.1.2. Toxic Air and Gas Flaring

While the contamination of the Niger Delta's waterways represent the most immediate observable dimension of ecological destruction in *Oil on Water*, the toxification of its atmosphere through gas flaring denotes a subtler and in many respects more destructive and hidden form of slow violence. The burning of natural gas associated with oil extraction, or simply gas flaring, has been one of the most destructive and least prosecuted environmental crimes sustained against Niger Delta communities for decades (Faturoti et al. 1). Habila puts the presence of gas flaring in the landscape with imagery that swings between the amusing and the catastrophic. "I went and sat on the hill to stare at the water and the faraway gas flares that emerged suddenly from pillarlike pipes, holding up their roof of odious black smoke." (Habila 109). The illumination of the flares in the sky is amusing, but all they show is ruin. The metaphor of pillars holding up a roof is ironic because what the flares build overhead is not a sheltering ceiling but permanent atmospheric contamination that Habila figures as both visually arresting and ecologically perilous. The word "odious" insists on the moral dimension of what is being perceived, giving the gas flares an offensive feature against the landscape.

Habila's most extended account of gas flaring consequences is delivered through the voice of a doctor who has served in a Delta village and witnessed the promise of oil discovery transform into a slow poisoning process of the community. "Night and day it burned, and now

the villagers had no need for candles or lamps, all they had to do at night was to throw open their doors and windows and just like that, everything was illuminated. That light soon became the village square." (Habila 118) examining this passage encompasses, with precision, the arc of slow violence. Initially, the flare arrives as a gift, a source of warmth, and communal harmony, where it establishes itself first as a source of wonder and social cohesion. The doctor continues : "I told them of the dangers that accompany that quenchless flare, 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: it was rising steadily. In one year it had grown to almost twice the safe level. "The use of the word "quenchless" indicates an unfiltered admission that the corporate machine lacks the ability to be satiated and rather continues on consuming endlessly. Furthermore, the community's inability to comprehend or perceive the danger is not a failure of intelligence, but it falls into the reality of slow violence, where time and corporate interest work in unison to delay and hide the accumulative ecological damages.

This passage connects directly to Nixon's concept of "the long dyings", of which casualties, both human and nonhuman, unfold gradually over years or generations rather than happening suddenly (Nixon 2). Simultaneously, the absence of scientific resources and the active suppression of information by the oil companies, who, when the doctor presented his finding, "offered me money and a job" and later on issued his report to the government only to be filed away and forgotten (Habila 118–19). The oil corporations' attempt to redirect his findings away from public knowledge illustrates how slow violence is institutionally maintained through deliberate management of information to ensure community suffering remains invisible to those outside the Delta, and therefore incapable of generating the political will necessary to produce change (Nixon 16). Habila's decision to insert this critique with a first-person voice, not that of an activist or a theorist but for someone bound by the ethics of

his job, suggests that pure reportage cannot yield results when it is being systematically smothered by industrial power.

The novel draws an explicit connection between the toxification of air and the annihilation of the nonhuman life that once populated the Delta's skies. "She wordlessly turned and pointed at the faraway sky, toward the oil fields. —Gas flares. They kill them. Not only the bats, other flying creatures as well." (Habila 100). Language as a medium has failed to encompass the weight and the scale of the loss that Gloria feels, only opting to a "wordless" gesture of turning towards a destruction so normalized that it requires no elaboration, by which it emphasises the exhausting and continuous nature of slow violence. Moreover, the death of "the bats" is a subtle indication that the dark environment where these nocturnal animals used to live is invaded by the constant illumination of the gas flares, which permanently alters their natural cycle by turning night into an artificial, toxic day. Simultaneously, the physical death of aerial creatures provides undeniable physical proof of the ecological crime. By depicting the sky as a toxic space that actively kills its natural inhabitants.

2.1.3. Destruction of Ecosystems

In *Oil on Water*, the ecological destruction of the Niger Delta is not announced through a single identifiable catastrophe, it rather arrives through incremental buildup of absences. The birds are no longer on the branches, the fish no longer in the river, the crabs no longer in the shallow waters, and the plants no longer capable of growth in soil that has been deprived of its sustenance. Habila's consistent imagery of this ecosystematic collapse is a powerful achievement due to the fact that it refuses immediacy and instead insists on the chronic and accumulative aspect. The destruction of the Delta's biodiversity has settled over the landscape for so long to the point where its pre-extraction times only exist in the fading memory of its elder inhabitants. This is the temporal structure of slow violence in practice, a

violence that exceeds the span of individual consciousness and that turns attempts to witness, document, or contest this violence extremely difficult. Time, therefore, becomes "the ultimate cover-up, a dependable ally in camouflaging "smart" warfare's sprawling toll" (Habila 210).

The novel's most accurate image of wildlife destruction occurs in a passage of immense sensory density: "The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter. We followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (Habila 15). The atmosphere that "grows heavy" is not stemming from the natural feature of thick and heavy air akin to swamps, but rather it has acquired a physical weight from the dead landscape, one that translates the "stench" into something tangible that presses down on its observer. The birds are "draped over tree branches" as opposed to being in a state of rest, the word "draped" strips the vitality from the creatures. It refers to the birds as inanimate pieces of cloth draped over trees instead of the chosen position of living things. The image of their wings "outstretched" and "slick with oil" renders the tools that the birds most rely on permanently stagnant. The black oil that coats them erases whatever distinguished colours that these species of birds used to have and instead paints them with the blackness of contamination. In this sense, oil does not merely kill, but it also turns the natural world and its diversity into a monochromatic mass of dead matter.

The dead fish that "bob white-bellied between tree roots" fully submerges the scene into total aquatic and aerial ecological collapse, a landscape where sky and water are both unable to sustain life. The image of the fish turned upside down, exposing their white bellies, suggests that to expose the bellies of fish is to expose what is meant to be hidden, to invert the natural order. The dead fish floating at the surface are the visible evidence of an invisible destruction that has occurred below. Moreover, the fish appeared in a cluster "between tree roots", suggesting that trees are now tasked with collecting the remnants of the "long dyings".

Similar to how every aspect of this ecological disaster is the accumulation of a prolonged hidden violence,

Habila's description of the pipelines that criss-cross the Delta function as the visible evidence of the destructive system in constant operation. "It turned out this wasn't a village at all. It looked like a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meager landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes crisscrossed and interconnected endlessly all over the eerie field. We walked inland, ducking under or hopping over the giant pipes, our shoes and trousers turning black with oil." (Habila 36). The science fiction comparison is not rhetorical; it signals the degree to which the oil extraction infrastructure has made the landscape alien to its own inhabitants, a landscape whose closest example is dystopian science fiction. The pipelines "sprout" from the earth, a verb related to organic growth but here applied to metal structures, producing an inverted image where the industrial displaced the botanical. The earth is described as "oil-fecund", an ironic phrase, for the fecund land that once was a source of food and life has been replaced by corporate productivity that generates wealth for distant interests while it leaves destruction behind it. This grounds it to what Cheryll Glotfelty calls "commodified representation" of nature (Glotfelty and Fromm xxx). Where oil corporations view nature as charts, data, and commodified wealth. The "evil-smelling" earth is the physical price paid for a system that values the land only for its transactional output.

Elsewhere in the novel, the pipelines still hold the imagery of organic perversion, yet through an extended bodily simile: "the ever-present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old shriveled hand, and sometimes in squiggles like ominous writing on the wall" (Habila 147). The author's description of the pipelines starts with their resemblance to the organic infrastructure of tree roots, then their resemblance to a sick body,

and lastly to an “ominous” sign of imminent catastrophe. This progression enacts the novel’s broader argument about ecological time: what begins as an extension of nature becomes a symptom of disease over decades and ultimately threatens destruction. The figure of “diseased veins", however, combines the novel’s corporatized natural landscape with a precise vocabulary of illness that connects environmental degradation to bodily deterioration. The land, much like its inhabitants, is visibly sick, and its sickness has been secretly developing for decades.

The culmination of this ecosystemic collapse is starkly rendered in this single image : “the weight of the oil tight like a hangman’s noose around the neck of whatever life-form lay underneath” (Habila 180). The author's application of the simile of “the noose” is morally charged, particularly due to the oil’s catastrophic effect on submerged life and its transformation to what might be called an industrial accident whereby it sits closer to a deliberate execution. The phrase “whatever life-form lay underneath” extends the violence beyond what is visible; it encompasses everything that cannot be seen and therefore cannot be mourned or counted. By insisting that it is there even if it cannot be seen, Habila performs the act of witness that the novel consistently presents as both ethical necessity and literary responsibility.

2.1.4. Displacement and Loss of Land and Livelihood

Displacement in Oil on Water is amongst the final destinations of ecological destruction. When the rivers can no longer yield fish, the farmlands no longer sustain crops, and the air carries toxins, the communities that have built their existence around these resources are left with no recognisable image of the land they inhabit (Nixon 19). Displacement, in this context, is not a sudden spectacle of a catastrophe but the final stage of a prolonged incremental dispossession, at which slow violence has dismantled the conditions of life that abandonment becomes the only strategy to survive. Habila draws the trajectory of this

tragic existential crisis neatly by mapping the movement of Delta communities from ancestral land to the margins of urban centres. In the novel, displacement is not only geographical, it is also the loss of identity and the continuity of a world built over generations, a loss that cannot be reconstructed in the spaces of urban cities. Rob Nixon emphasizes that displacement is not just about the literal movement of people but also involves temporal and rhetorical shifts “that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs" (Nixon 7)

The novel's abandoned villages are a strong and sustained symbol of this dispossession. They appear repeatedly in different variations in the narrative, testifying to the point at which a community’s capacity to endure ecological peril has been finally exhausted. “THE NEXT VILLAGE was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart yet powerless to return.” (Habila 15). This passage argues that displacement is not an isolated event but a pattern where this emptied-out village is “almost a replica of the last”. It speaks of a systematic consequence of extraction that has emptied village after village that renders individual loss difficult to isolate from collective catastrophe. Habila pictures the forced displacement through the image of ghosts suspended over roofs “unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return". These communities that have not chosen to leave have been rendered unable to stay, and their abandonment has made the atmosphere of the village consumed with “indefinable sadness” accompanied by “the flagrant stench” in the air.

The novel insists that what has been lost is not only shelter but also the entire infrastructure of life, grounding many accounts of displacement in the destruction of a system of livelihood, the different resources, upon which Delta communities have depended for generations. Habila compresses this reality in this passage: “Their rivers were already

polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines" (Habila 39). The land that once provided sustenance for its inhabitants is now useless. The word "grew" applied to gas flares and pipelines signify as though they were organic products of the soil, signifying in bitter irony that the land now simply grows pipelines and gas flares. It eliminated the political and intentional elements of these industrial infrastructures from its beneficiaries and, by that logic, its victims.

The novel's consistent stress upon the loss of ancestral land and its value to its inhabitants, through forced displacement for survival, appears vividly in this passage: "We left, we headed northwards, we've lived in five different places now, but always we've had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So your question, are we happy here? I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home?" (Habila 41). Chief Ibiram describes the harsh reality of perpetual wandering, one deeply rooted in land displacement. It draws to what Nixon calls "developmental refugees", where individuals are caught in a "centrifugal narrative of displacement, dispossession, and exodus" driven by the development of industrial agendas (Nixon 158). The fact that they have lived in "five different places" since leaving their ancestral home highlights how slow violence "overspills clear boundaries in time and space" (Nixon 7). Furthermore, Ibiram's reply to the question points to the temporal and psychological cost of dispossession; once a community is severed from its environment, it takes generations to restore what has been lost. Ibiram's people are left in a state of an unidentifiable point in time and space, where their past has been written off and their future is uncertain (Nixon 161).

Habila figures displacement of communities toward Port Harcourt and other urban centres as dissolution, where social formations that were once held together are disintegrated. "His voice was hopeful, but his eyes were pessimistic, cloudy. Gradually the community was drifting toward the big city, and sooner or later it would be swallowed up, its people

dispersed. like people getting off a bus and joining the traffic on the city streets. He sighed" (Habila 150). The author describes the way communities, ones that held together for generations, are dissolved through the simile of “people getting off a bus and joining the traffic on the city streets”, their identities as members of a particular place and group of people now faded into the indifference of the city. The image of being “swallowed up” suggests that city life does not incorporate these communities into its system but rather consumes them. This connects to what postcolonial ecocriticism has identified as one of its profound consequences of environmental dispossession: the destruction not only of material livelihood but also of the cultural and relational structures that land and place sustain. When the land becomes uninhabitable, what is lost is not a location but a world.

Slow violence operates not only through physical destruction but also by transforming inhabited landscapes into "irretrievable" spaces, a process that effectively facilitates systemic amnesia. This phenomenon is starkly illustrated vividly in this passage : "The only signs that a community had once thrived here were a few sticks jutting out of the water, pieces of straw from roof thatches scattered in the mud and a pile of garbage under a tree, that was all” (Habila 149). The phrase “that was all” following a list of scarce objects constitutes that the evidence is minimal and prone to disappear, like the community that “had once thrived” there. This is the terminus of slow violence as Habila conceives it, where slow violence erases the evidence of the existence of creatures to render their dispossession invisible by ensuring that the landscape itself carries no testimony to what it once held.

2.2. Colonial Continuity: Oil Companies as Neo-Colonial Powers

Kwame Nkrumah theorises in his book that colonialism is “the final and perhaps most dangerous stage of imperialism” (4). A state, in this case, may possess all external markers of sovereignty yet it works as an instrument for foreign capital extraction. Nigeria is a direct manifestation of this. Although it gained political independence in 1960, the country is still

embedded in this neocolonial framework. Helon Habila, in his novel *Oil on Water,* shows how traditional European colonialism did not come to an end as multinational corporations now act as a modern form of colonialism that exploits people and land for profit. It is also important to understand that neocolonial exploitation does not happen in isolation from the Nigerian state. It in fact thrives through what Ember Yange identifies as a “triple alliance" where the combination of the state, social forces and international capital collaborate and make corporate profit a priority over citizen welfare (Yang 878).

The early manifestations of neocolonialism on a landscape happen through spatial arrangements that mirror the social fragmentation produced by oil extraction. The novel shows this by describing the habitats where oil companies’ owners and workers reside: "THE FLOODES' HOUSE was one of the many colonial-style buildings on the Port Harcourt waterfront, where most of the wealthy expatriate oil workers lived. It was hidden behind a tall, barbed-wire-topped wall, and I passed through two gates and about half a dozen security men talking to each other on radios" (Habila 81). This passage shows that neocolonialism justifies its presence on a land through business activity, but the physical infrastructure of occupation remains the same and rather identical to previous colonial structures. The gates, security and barbed wires are neocolonial conditions that mirror traditional colonialism. Patrick Wolfe asserts this by saying that “invasion is a structure and not an event” (Wolfe 388). These types of buildings and even oil companies are a way to assert spatial foreign power on Nigerian lands, as they require constant military surveillance to maintain the boundary between them and locals. This spatial segregation represents the continuity of colonial patterns under the guise of technical expertise and legitimate profit seeking.

Neocolonialism cannot exist and function in isolation from the postcolonial state itself. Yange argues that "the state, driven by its reliance on oil revenue, aligns itself with the interests of multinational oil corporations to ensure uninterrupted production," creating

conditions where the state "largely sacrifices the well-being of the populace in policy making and governance in preference to the interests of international capital" (Yange 878). In the novel, Dr Dagogo shows how the government complies with foreign companies and causes institutional corruption. He recounts:

> When I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job. The manager, an Italian guy, wrote me a check and said I was now on their payroll… So, when people started dying, I took blood samples and recorded the toxins in them, and this time I sent my results to the government. They thanked me and dumped the results in some filing cabinet. (Habila 119)

Dr Dogogo holds clear evidence that the oil industry is causing death, yet the state responds by ignoring and erasing this evidence. This passage reveals how the government provides legitimacy to corporate operations and uses its power in an obscuring way rather than using it to solve environmental destruction.

The corruption extends to the police: "They gave the police a little something to look the other way, but sooner or later they'll get greedy. They'll arrest us, or take over the whole business themselves" (Habila 59). The role of the police in a neocolonial regime is a combination of profit-seeking and the suppression of resistance, as the continuation of oil production provides them a steady source of money through bribes. Neocolonial governance thus blurs the line between state authority and private interest, transforming law and enforcement into a mechanism of resource extraction.

Neocolonialism and state complicity appear when the government and corporate powers coordinate to suppress the community's resistance. The novel depicts that through Chief Malabo, who refuses to allow oil drilling on ancestral lands. Habila writes: "Chief Malabo was arrested, his hands tied behind his back as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of supporting the militants and plotting against the federal government and threatening to

kidnap foreign oil workers" (Habila 40). Chief Malabo's actual stance which is defending community land rights is transformed through state power into a crime: "threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers." This shows how the state labels anyone who opposes and resists oil extraction as a terrorist. Habila continues to show how political pressure is also exerted on Chief Malabo's village:

> The list was long—but, the lawyer said, if the elders would consent to the oil company's demands, sell the land... A politician, who introduced himself as their senator, came all the way from Abuja and assured them that their situation was receiving national attention, it was in the papers, and he was going to fight for them to see that their chief was returned safe and sound. With him were two white men, oil executives. The villagers chased them away. Others came, but they were all liars, all working for the oil companies, trying one way or another to break the villagers' resolve. (Habila 40)

This passage reveals the "triple alliance" in action: the senator represents the state, the oil executives represent foreign capital, and together they employ both coercion through Chief Malabo's imprisonment and inducement through promises of "national attention" to force land transfer.

Other encounters also expose this coordination between the state and corporations. The novel states: "Already the oil-company men had started visiting, accompanied by important politicians from Port Harcourt, holding long conferences with Chief Malabo, the head chief, who was also Chief Ibiram's uncle" (Habila 39). This type of repetitive visits and encounters normalises the fusion of state and corporate authority, which later on facilitates land seizure. Their attempt to negotiate with Chief Malabo ended with him being imprisoned and later killed, and them coming later to take the land as if nothing had happened.

Neocolonialism thus operates gradually through persuasion (conferences with politicians present), intimidation (arrest on fabricated charges), and ultimately dispossession (the transfer of land). Each level involves state participation, transforming what might appear as corporate activity into a state-sanctioned project of resource extraction.

Ideologically, neocolonialism presents exploitation in a benevolent way, while creating a biased image of the resistance. The character of James Floode, the British oil engineer, tells Rufus, "Such great potential. You people could easily become the Japan of Africa, the USA of Africa, but the corruption is incredible... Our pipelines are vandalized daily, losing us millions... and millions for the country as well. The people don't understand what they do to themselves" (Habila 83). In this way, he frames corporate activities as development and Nigerian resistance as ignorance. He positions Japan and the USA as developmental models that need to be followed, reinforcing the colonial idea that the West represents the apex of civilisation. “Millions for the country” makes the oil extraction business seem like an asset to the country when in fact it has caused underdevelopment and environmental catastrophes. The line “The people don’t understand what they do to themselves” strips agency from Nigerian people and makes them seem irrational, which frames resistance as a failure of comprehension rather than a rational defence of land and life. Another manifestation of the biased view can be seen in the media, too. Rob Nixon asserts this by saying: “Our media bias toward spectacular violence exacerbates the vulnerability of ecosystems treated as disposable by turbo-capitalism” (4). In the novel, Rufus observes a BBC news report where poverty and corruption is discussed: "This segment was accompanied by a long, rote-like voice-over about poverty in Nigeria, and how corruption sustained that poverty, and how oil was the main source of revenue, and how because the country was so corrupt, only a few had access to that wealth" (Habila 83). This report along with Floode’s passage exemplifies what Edward Said theorizes in Orientalism, which is the

production of biased knowledge about the "orient" (Said 4-5) which eventually legitimizes intervention. This attribution of underdevelopment to corruption in Nigeria rather than to extractive regimes produces the neocolonial "cycle of dependency and underdevelopment," where poor nations stay "underdeveloped and marginalized" despite generating enormous wealth (Yange 876). In this context, Nigerian corruption becomes the explanation for resource dispossession, when in fact the extraction regime itself produces the corruption it condemns.

Rufus responds to Flood in a way that rejects this neocolonial narrative and exposes the reality behind it:

> But 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. (Habila 83)

Rufus exposes the regime's complicity and the neocolonial logic as he shows that the government's indifference to destruction and suffering in favour of corporations becomes the umbrella that protects neocolonial regimes and their extractive operations.

2.2.1. Land as Commodity vs. Land as Home

The main violence of both colonialism and neocolonialism is transforming the ancestral land into a site of resource extraction and capital accumulation. Oil on water depicts this transformation through the Niger Delta community, whose relationship to the land has been altered by foreign corporations. The novel stages the conflict between two incompatible

ontologies: the capitalist view of land as a resource to be exploited, bought and sold, and the indigenous view of land as home.

The Niger Delta landscape gets transformed through the oil industry from a sacred ecosystem to a land that only gets its value from being a container for extractable resources. Habila writes:

> It turned out this wasn't a village at all. It looked like a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meagre landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes crisscrossed and interconnected endlessly all over the eerie field. We walked inland, ducking under or hopping over the giant pipes, our shoes and trousers turning black with oil. (Habila 36)

Human habitation here has been replaced by corporate infrastructure. The proliferation of pipes demonstrates Rob Nixon's "slow violence", they are ordinary industrial infrastructure and the instruments where land turns from livable to lethal. The oil soaked. The toxicity indicated by the oil-soaked shoes and clothing shows how slow violence is already inscribed in the physical environment itself. The novel continues:

> Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines. But the snake, the snake in the garden wouldn't rest, it kept on hissing and the apple only grew larger and more alluring each day. And already far off in the surrounding waters the oil-company boats were patrolling, sometimes openly sending their men to the village to take samples of soil and water. The village decided to keep them away by sending out their own patrols over the surrounding rivers, in canoes, all armed with bows and arrows and clubs and a few guns. (Habila 39-40)

This passage invokes the Biblical narrative of Eden to frame the ecological transformation as a fall from "paradise", which is how the people describe their land before oil extraction in the novel. The snake here is the regime itself, the ultimate source of temptation and danger. The "apple" that "grew larger and more alluring" shows how oil extraction tempts individuals and even communities to participate in turning their land into a commodity, which enforces corporate control.

Another passage in the novel reveals how land gets commodified :

> They came with a whole army, waving guns and looking like they meant business. They had a contract, they said, Chief Malabo had signed it in prison before he died, selling them all of his family land, and that was where they'd start drilling, and whoever wanted to join him and sell his land would be paid handsomely, but the longer the people held out, the more the value of their land would fall. (Habila 40).

The mechanisms are coercion (guns, military force), falsification of consent (a contract allegedly signed while the chief was imprisoned), and market logic (the threat that land value will decline if communities resist). Complicity of the state is also evident in this passage through the sudden appearance of the alleged contract, which shows how the government participates in giving away the land to corporations. Harvey's "accumulation by disposition" explains how communities are forced into surrendering land, which will eventually be controlled by capital (Harvey 71). This shows through the passage through the chief's imprisonment the threat that the land would lose its value. This pure capitalistic logic and actions force people to surrender their land. This commodification via coercive threats is also evident in this passage, where Habila describes the initial offer to Chief Malabo's community: "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—" (Habila 39). The repetition of "money" and the emphasis on its quantity show how capitalism converts land into a commodity that can be bought and sold easily, and it also reflects the amount of money they are yielding from the exploitation of the land, which ironically goes into taking it from its people.

The novel also shows an alternative view of land rooted in indigenous relationality, which goes against the capitalist view which treats land as a commodity. Chief Ibiram narrates the original condition of his community in language that invokes sacred history: "Once upon a time, they lived in paradise. It was a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was close-knit, made up of cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters" (Habila 38). This passage shows the economic condition of the region prior to oil extraction which was based on fishing, hunting and farming that met the community needs. The abundant resources "lacked for nothing" and the kinship structure "cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters" establish land as the material foundation of an expansive and happy community that is looked upon as a home and not as a scarce resource to be competed for. The invocation of "paradise" establishes land as sacred and with a divinely-ordained relationship between people and land that has been violated by oil extraction.

The deepest articulation of land as home in the novel is evident in Chief Malabo's statement, where he refused to sell the land:

> This was their ancestral land, this was where their fathers and their fathers' fathers were buried. They'd been born here, they'd grown up here, they were happy here, and though they may not be rich, the land had been good to them, they never lacked for anything. What kind of custodians of the land would they be if they sold it off? (Habila 39)

An individual is defined by their environing community, and this community includes the living, the dead, and the unborn, all of whom are tied to the ancestral land (Matolino 3). This passage highlights exactly that. Selling their land would reduce this home's social and spiritual reality, which the chief knows is ontologically and economically catastrophic.

The shrine at Irikefe depicts land as a healing space and as a site of resistance to neocolonial governance. The novel notes: "Now the worshippers were in the water, swaying and humming; ... This was a place of healing" (Habila 181). This passage highlights the spiritual and emotional relationship people have with their land, and the intimate relationship they have with it despite the toxicity caused by the commodification of land.

Displacement is the ultimate consequence of land commodification. The novel traces this catastrophe through this passage:

> And that was why we decided to leave, ten families. We didn't take their money. The money would be our curse on them for taking our land and for killing our chief. We left, we headed northwards, we've lived in five different places now, but always we've had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So your question, are we happy here? I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home? (Habila 40-41)

The commodification of land leaves them as "mere wanderers without a home", as they are faced with two choices: to accept the money and legitimise the theft of their land and home or refuse and condemn oneself to permanent displacement. The question "Are we happy here?" is unanswerable as happiness is tied to the existence of home, and home is linked to ancestral land. Without land, people lack the conditions for a dignified existence. The novel suggests that in the neocolonial context, land commodification prevails over indigenous belonging, leaving dispossessed communities in permanent crisis, as those who understand

land as home will always choose displacement over selling their lands.

2.3. Eco-resistance and Environmental Reclamation

The Niger Delta generates most of Nigeria's revenue through crude oil, however, this resource is also the reason why the region is becoming uninhabitable, as the wealth generated by multinational corporations is polluting the region. Eco-resistance emerges from this paradox, where people stand together against the devastation of their homeland. The environmental destruction in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is what drives marginalized communities toward resistance. Militancy and storytelling in this context become tools the community uses to reclaim agency over their environment and identity, where they are systematically othered and ignored by state and corporate actors.

2.3.1. Militancy as Ecological Protest

Understanding the systematic destruction that precedes the appearance of armed resistance makes it easy to understand why militancy is an ecological protest and not a criminal act. Simon et al. note that "the degradation and pollution are threats and danger to the well-being of individuals and society," arguing that "environmental degradation, pollution, poverty, lack of social amenities as well as insensitivity of the Federal government and multinational companies in the Niger Delta region are the major causes of youth restiveness in the region" (385). The novel highlights this by opening with clear descriptions of environmental devastation instead of an act of militancy. Rufus, the narrator, is always describing those scenes throughout the novel. This is crucial in establishing the material conditions that motivate the armed resistance later. Nouanwa argues that "the natives are bound to make recourse to nationalist violence to wrench their lives free from the shackles of imperialist and colonialist dominationism" (8), grounding this argument in Fanonian theory that violence becomes justified when colonial (or neocolonial) structures foreclose all peaceful avenues for change (Nouanwa 14).

Simon et al. argue that the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies failed to honour the aspirations of the Niger Delta people towards their region and resources. Angered by these developments, some youths of the region established armed groups (384-385). In the novel, when Rufus confronts the reality of environmental damage and political helplessness, he reflects: "I had seen that kind of anger before in many of my friends, people I went to school with; some of them were now in the forests with the fighters, some of them had made millions from ransom money, but a lot of them were dead" (Habila 77). This shows how the youth are stuck in choosing between acceptance and armed resistance in a system that only yields more ecological devastation. The militants themselves articulate this frustration. In the novel, one militant explains: "Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence every day. Tell them how 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" (Habila 176). This passage shows how escalation is a forced action that militants take in the face of environmental destruction caused by neocolonialism.

The attacks on machinery that cause environmental destruction are regarded as a form of ecological reclamation. The militants position themselves near oil infrastructure strategically. "The militants always concealed the locations of their camps, because their lives depended on that, and on the ability to pick up their tents and move with the first hint of trouble from the federal patrols that were in constant war with them." "What was certain, though, was that they never strayed too far from the pipelines and oil rigs and refineries, which they constantly threatened to blow up, thereby ensuring for themselves a steady livelihood" (Habila 14).

The proximity of the militants to the pipelines allows them to hinder extraction, create a threat, and demand ransom or negotiation. It also gives them the ability to strike the

machinery that's destroying their environment. The threat by militants to destroy oil infrastructure must also be read as an ecological protest when a militant tells Rufus, "By this time tomorrow, one of the major oil depots will be burning. I want you to write about it, tell them I am responsible… We will make it so hot for the government and the oil companies that they will be forced to pull out" (Habila 175). He articulates a clear environmental objective, which is to force oil companies to stop their operations. Militant operations are purposeful protests designed to recapture narrative authority and draw world attention. To conclude, in the context of the Niger Delta, any type of sabotage is not terrorism but environmental activism that aims to stop neocolonial companies from destroying the Niger Delta ecosystem.

The kidnapping of Isabel Floode, the British wife of a petroleum engineer, is a symbolic resistance against the machinery of oil exploitation. To understand it purely as a crime is to miss its ecological and postcolonial dimensions. Isabel Floode is deliberately chosen because she represents the very system poisoning the Niger Delta. Her husband is a petroleum engineer, a servant of the oil industry whose labor extracts crude at the cost of the environment in the Niger Delta.

In the novel, one of the conspirators in Isabel's kidnapping shows the logic behind this action. He says: "It wasn't even kidnapping; I'd just be collecting payment for all the pain these people caused to me… And another point, the money wasn't even coming out of his pocket: the oil company pays the ransom… the money came from our oil, so we would be getting back what was ours in the first place" (Habila 167-8). The ransom money is extracted from corporate profits generated by stolen oil extracted from stolen land. To demand ransom is to take back a portion of the wealth stolen from the Niger Delta. This redistribution ensures that oil wealth belongs to the community and not to foreign corporations or the federal government. Kidnapping is also designed to make extraction so costly, so dangerous, that it

becomes economically unsustainable, which makes it a powerful act of land reclamation from foreign domination.

> The militants also use media to add a communicative dimension to their resistance. The kidnappers, eager for publicity, would usually invite a select team of reporters to their hideout to confirm that the hostages were alive and unharmed, after which they would make long speeches about the environment and their reasons for taking up arms against the oil companies and the government. (Habila 47)

Them insisting on that journalists witness shows that their cause is bigger than collecting ransom or terrorizing people. They want the world to hear about the environmental destruction and suffering caused by oil extraction. The professor himself confirms this by saying, "We 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? "(Habila 176), which shows how militants are genuinely committed to resistance and reclaiming their land.

Nouanwa concludes that *Oil on Water* is not just a story about oil conflict, but a rich postcolonial text that dramatizes the symbolic politics of resistance in a region caught between abundance and abandonment (8-9). This contradiction happens in the Niger Delta because of the abundance of resources, yet its abandonment by the state and justice systems creates a fertile land for militant resistance to appear. This serves as one of the only mechanisms the community can use to protest and reclaim agency over their lands and resources.

2.3.2 Cultural Practices and Storytelling as Resistance

In Helon Habila's *Oil on Water,* storytelling, rituals, journalism, and ecological knowledge of the land are depicted as effective tools that the Nigerian Delta community uses

to transform their silenced and othered voices and lands into powerful testimonies that challenge capitalist exploitation and colonial erasure. The rituals in the shrine, the oral traditions and stories passed down by elders, and the journalists' written accounts all serve a shared goal: resistance. These practices attempt to restore and preserve the agency of both land and people against neocolonial appropriations.

Storytelling in *Oil on Water* is an act of testimony that preserves the collective memory of communities affected by oil exploitation and violence. The shrine in the novel encapsulates this memorial function:

> The shrine was started a long time ago after a terrible war—no one remembers what caused the war—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 warriors floated for miles on the river, until they were snagged on mangrove roots on the banks, or got stuck in the muddy swamps, half in and half out of the water. (Habila 101)

This narrative documents historical trauma and creates a story that centers collective survival and spiritual cleansing. In that way, the community claims agency over its own narrative and refutes being “othered” by the state and international capital. The shrine narrative continues: "That was when priests from different shrines got together and decided to build this shrine by the river. The land needed to be cleansed of blood, and pollution" (Habila 101). This account of priest actions shows how storytelling is a communal responsibility. The shrine becomes a symbol of resistance and a space where the community refuses to be defined by colonial trauma and violence. The line "the land needed to be cleansed" establishes a link between spiritual purification and environmental restoration.

The novel also describes a moment of storytelling observation: "I saw a group of children, about five of them, all about the same age, seated around an old woman. She was

telling them a story" (Habila 28). This line might appear simple, but it actually captures oral transmission as the primary vehicle for cultural continuity. The children listening to the old woman represent the future preservation of collective historical consciousness. In an age where life is disrupted by military violence and oil extraction, the elders sit there to transmit knowledge through intergenerational storytelling. This ensures that even as the land is physically transformed by extraction, the community's understanding of its own history and values persists.

The rituals performed at the sacred shrine are daily acts of resistance that assert indigenous spiritual sovereignty against secular materialism of oil capitalism." And each day the worshippers go in a procession to the river, to bathe in it, to cry to it, and to promise never to abominate it ever again" (Habila 101). This daily ritual depicts the landscape as something sacred rather than a commodity or extractable resource. The promise "never to abominate it ever again" shows that the care and dedication of indigenous people towards the land stands in direct opposition to the colonial extractive logic that sees land as disposable and inexhaustible.

The dialogue embedded in this ritual account is particularly revealing: "—And did that help? Did the rivers return to normal? —Yes, and ever since we have managed to keep this island free from oil prospecting and other activities that contaminate the water and lead to greed and violence" (Habila 101). This passage shows the effectiveness of rituals not through intervention but through collective environmental maintenance and stewardship. Their spiritual practices prevented the destruction that touched other neighbouring regions. This shows that indigenous knowledge systems are powerful, as it shows that environmental protection is closely tied to rituals and spiritual practices. The link drawn between "contamination" and "greed and violence" also shows that the community is aware that

ecological degradation is inseparable from social violence. Therefore, oil extraction for them is both an ecological disaster and a spiritual transgression.

The novel further emphasises ritual temporality in the phrase: "We believe the sun rising brings a renewal. All of creation is born anew with the new day. Whatever goes wrong in the night has a chance for redemption after a cycle" (Habila 74). This cosmology of cyclical time and perpetual renewal stands in stark contrast to the linear, extractive time of industrial capitalism. Each dawn offers redemption, suggesting an ethic of forgiveness and restoration that mirrors the community's approach to environmental healing. This temporal philosophy enables psychological and spiritual resilience in the face of ongoing violence, providing a framework through which catastrophe can be reimagined as a temporary disruption within an eternal cycle.

Sculptural art functions alongside ritual as another form of cultural expression. The narrator explains:

> The sculptures came later. As the priesthood grew, some became specialists in mud and wooden figures. These figures represent the ancestors watching over us. They face the east, to acknowledge the beauty of the sun rising, for without the sun there would be no life. And some face the west, to show the dying sun the way home, and to welcome the moon. (Habila 101)

The sculptures represent the physical form of traditional knowledge and ancestor reverence. Their directional orientation towards cardinal points grounds the community in sacred geography. These objects function as what anthropologists call "embodied archives," storing collective memory and spiritual knowledge in material form that survives beyond individual lifetime. These objects function as embodied archives, storing collective memory and spiritual knowledge in material form that survives beyond individual lifetime.

The resilience of these sculptures in the face of military destruction is a clear indicator of the persistence of cultural practice:

> Although the number of statues had greatly diminished, those that now stood looked as if they had always been like this. Their scars and punctures seemed to have been put there by time and weather, and not by random weaponry. There were two men walking among the statues, picking up loose stones, wiping off the final traces of violence from figures. (Habila 178-179)

This passage shows how the community is determined to do the restoration work in the aftermath of military resistance. The deliberate act of "wiping off the final traces of violence" performs a symbolic cleansing that parallels the rituals of washing at the river. The community transforms colonial violence into endurance and resistance by reintegrating damaged sculptures back into their spiritual function. In that way, the community does not allow colonial violence to be the final word on these sacred objects.

The novel also highlights that the survival of the community is closely tied to ecological knowledge that generations have accumulated through living on the land. The comments on local guides: "They were just the old man and his son, guiding us in these waters that they depended upon for their livelihood" (Habila 37), although brief, encapsulate centuries of accumulated knowledge about tidal patterns and seasonal variations. And that the human relationship to water and land in general is intimate and intergenerational. The relationship between the father and son also symbolises the transmission of ecological knowledge as a practice of cultural resistance and continuity that cannot be reduced to an economic value, which in this context is imposed by colonial entities.

Habila also presents people as ecological agents and moral entities: "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 91). This belief holds entities accountable to Mother Earth and makes the planet a person and an agent with moral authority. Spirits who have "sinned against Mother Earth" cannot find rest, showing that hurting and violating the earth produces disturbance. The idea of "rest" implies that beings are fundamentally at home in the earth's embrace if they do not violate it. This directly goes against the capitalist logic that the earth exists purely for extraction. In this view, those who violate the land become displaced and haunted by their bad actions. The oil companies and their representatives are depicted as the "bad spirits" whose sin against Mother Earth makes them spiritually troubled and restless.

The novel also links religious authority to ecological knowledge of the land: "The villagers were all connected to the shrine by religion, and the chief priest had authority over the whole settlement. The villagers were fishermen, mostly, making their living on the river that poured its water into the sea, leading away upstream into a hinterland of marshes and forests and swamps" (Habila 92). The authority of the priest helps protect this sacred site and the water system, which the fishing economy depends on. This integration of spiritual and economic authority shows that the community does not treat the land's ecological knowledge as a separate and isolated system. This goes against Western and colonial separation of sacred and secular, spiritual and material domains on which capitalist extraction is based on.

The novelist goes further to frame journalism and written testimonies as essential forms of resistance:

> In his lecture that day in Lagos, Zaq said that the best stories are the ones we write with tears in our eyes, the ones whose stings we feel personally. After visiting my sister at the hospital, unable to sleep, haunted by the image of burned flesh and the smell of petrol that clung to the hospital walls and corridors, I picked up pen and paper and the words had come effortlessly. I wrote about our childhood, about our days catching crabs to pay our way

> through secondary school, about Boma's dreams of becoming a doctor. (Habila 105)

This passage reveals how trauma caused by neocolonialism becomes material for testimony where "[he] had posted the story on the Internet, and it had been quoted and reproduced over and over on websites" (Habila 105). In this way, the community's suffering gains more visibility through this type of digital circulation. It also becomes a type of testimony that resists state and corporate media monopolies. The Niger Delta community is also aware of the power of journalism, as they urge journalists to write about their stories:

> Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence every day. Tell them how 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. That is the truth, remember that. You can go. (Habila 176)

This passage establishes journalism as a form of witnessing to both environmental degradation and political dispossession. In this way, journalism becomes inseparable from the assertion of Indigenous land rights. Journalism thus is a crucial tool of resistance that the community uses in their fight against the state and corporations that want to silence its voices.

To conclude, in *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila shows that storytelling, rituals, ecological knowledge, and journalism are interconnected practices that the Niger Delta community uses to assert agency in the face of neocolonial corporations, and in that way, the silenced and "othered" landscapes of the Niger Delta find a voice.

Conclusion

Helon Habila's Oil on Water portrays eco resistance as an important decolonial practice that communities use to face neocolonialism. The framework of slow violence shows the environmental and social impact of oil exploitation that rendered the land to a corporate

zone of extraction. Through this lens, the incremental contamination of rivers, gas flaring consequences, collapse of biodiversity, and forced displacement of people become visible. In addition, the community resist Neocolonialism through the militant's sabotage of oil pipelines and kidnapping of high profile corporate executives , while communities like Chief Malabo's refuse giving their land at the cost of imprisonment and death, exposing the triple alliance that sustains Neo colonialism. furthermore, environmental reclamation is evidence in the novel through the preservation of indigenous storytelling, rituals, intergenerational ecological knowledge, and journalistic testimony. Taken together, these findings confirm that eco resistance is an essential decolonial logic in which the writer reimagines the Niger Delta as a contested site of identity and dignified human existence.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This research examined how Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) conceptualizes eco-resistance and environmental reclamation as decolonial practices in the context of the Niger Delta. The central problem addressed by this study was the urgent need to analyze how the narrative reimagines land not merely as a commodified space of imperial profit, but as a contested site of identity and resistance. By addressing this, the research sought to answer how the novel depicts the environmental and social impacts of oil exploitation and the ways in which characters and communities engage in acts of resistance against neocolonial forces to reclaim their territory and consciousness.

The analysis revealed that the novel portrays the Niger Delta as a geography of "slow violence," where the devastation of petroleum extraction operates through incremental, accretive, and institutionally obscured destruction. It was found that oil spills and gas flaring transform the environment into a "toxic landscape" where water sources are no longer life-sustaining but have become "archives of devastation". The key findings demonstrated that the novel frames neocolonialism as a "triple alliance" between the state, international capital, and local social forces, which prioritizes corporate profit over the welfare of the populace. Furthermore, the study showed that militancy and the sabotage of oil infrastructure are depicted not as random acts of criminality, but as forms of ecological protest and spatial articulations of power used to reclaim the natural wealth of the territory. Most importantly, the research highlighted that environmental reclamation is achieved through the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems, storytelling, and sacred rituals, which assert spiritual sovereignty against the secular materialism of oil capitalism.

Evaluating the theoretical framework, the interdisciplinary use of Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," and Edward Said's *Orientalism* provided essential critical insights for this analysis. Nixon's theory was foundational for identifying the "long dyings" and the hidden, time-delayed suffering that eludes conventional

representation, while Said's framework helped unveil the "eco-orientalism" used to justify extractive behavior. These theories successfully facilitated a transition from a purely aesthetic representation of nature to a rigorous structural critique of neocolonial power and environmental inequality.

This dissertation contributes to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism by bridging the gap between environmental literature and postcolonial studies, specifically within the context of African literature. While previous scholarship on *Oil on Water* has largely focused on themes of suffering, trauma, and gender oppression, this work helps address a significant gap by refocusing the discourse on active eco-resistance and the reclamation of land as a form of decolonization. It provides a new dimension to the interpretation of contemporary African literature by treating the ecological struggle as an essential dimension of territorial and ontological sovereignty.

One of the limitations encountered during the analysis of the selected novel is the scarcity of secondary critical sources that directly address the text's specific focus on environmental reclamation. Due to the limited availability of scholarly literature on this specific proactive dimension of the novel, the study depended largely on intensive close reading supported by relevant theoretical concepts and interdisciplinary research.

Further studies could explore how trauma and aggression intersect with environmental justice in other contemporary Niger Delta narratives, or apply an ecofeminist lens to examine the specific role of women's agency in grassroots environmental movements across African petro-states. Scholars might also extend these findings by conducting comparative analyses of literary representations of "resource curses" in different Global South regions to further theorize the relationship between literature and ecological decolonization.

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة المقاومة والاسترداد البيئي في رواية هيلون هابيلا "*زيت على الماء" (2010)*. تهدف الدراسة لتحليل الأرض كموقع للهوية والمقاومة في سياق دلتا النيجر، وليس مجرد فضاء للربح الإمبريالي. بالاستناد إلى نظرية النقد البيئي ما بعد الاستعماري لجراهام هوغان وهيلين تيفين، ومفهوم"العنف البطيء" لروب نيكسون، ونظرية الاستشراق لإدوارد سعيد، يركز التحليل على الكيفية التي تفضح بها رواية هبيلا الخسائر البيئية والبشرية المترتبة على استخراج النفط من خلال رحلة صحفيين من بورت هاركورت، روفوس وزاك، اللذان يجتازان دلتا النيجر الملوث بحثا عن رهينة بريطانية. يظهر البحث أن دلتا النيجر هي موقع للدمار البطيء والمتزايد حيث تقدم قوى الاستعمار النيوكولنيالية الربح الشركاتي على حساب البشر والبيئة. كما تظهر الدراسة أن تخريب البنى التحتية للنفط من قبل الجماعات المسلخة يمثل شكلا من أشكال الاحتجاج البيئي لاستعادة الأرض و أن سرد القصص، والطقوس المحلية، والمعرفة البيئية المتوارثة عبر الأجيال شكل قوي من أشكال المقاومة. تساهم هذه الدراسة في سد الفجوة بين الأدب البيئي والدراسات ما بعد الكولونيالية في سياق الأدب الأفريقي المعاصر، وذلك من خلال إظهار أن المقاومة البيئية الفاعلة ليست فقط انعكاسا للصدمة والمعاناة، بل بعد جوهري من أبعاد التحرر الاقليمي والوجودي من الاستعمار.

الكلمات الرئيسية: المقاومة البيئية، واستصلاح البيئة، والنقد البيئي ما بعد الاستعماري، ودلتا النيجر، والإمبريالية المؤسسية، النفط على الماء.