

Environmental Violence, Displacement, and Postcolonial Trauma in Nigeria's Niger Delta: A Reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Submission Track:

Received: 09-03-2026, Final Revision: 15-06-2026, Available Online: 27-06-2026

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta crisis in southern Nigeria has produced profound ecological devastation and entrenched human suffering, yet its literary and psychological dimensions remain insufficiently theorised within African trauma studies and postcolonial literary criticism. This study investigates Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), a work of hybrid narrative fiction documenting the environmental violence, political displacement, and communal disintegration wrought by petroleum extraction in Nigeria's oil-producing south, as a site of literary, political, and ethical inquiry. The study aims to analyse how Habila constructs his narrative as an act of literary witness that transforms individual and ecological suffering into collective political testimony, while foregrounding a distinctly petro-spatial configuration of trauma shaped by environmental collapse, institutional abandonment, and necropolitical governance. Employing a qualitative, text-based methodology grounded in close reading, the study draws on trauma theory, frameworks of complex PTSD, necropolitics, and the concept of atmospheric violence. The findings reveal that petro-trauma in the text operates through ecological disintegration, psychic fragmentation, and the structural erasure of communal identity — symptoms of a postcolonial state and multinational extractive order that render oil-producing populations simultaneously indispensable and expendable. The study contributes to African ecocriticism and postcolonial literary scholarship by establishing *Oil on Water* as a significant text in the genre of literary witness, while proposing extractive capitalism and corporate complicity as productive analytical trajectories in postcolonial African conflict literature. Ultimately, the study affirms that literature remains an indispensable counter-archive of political memory and a vehicle for challenging dominant discourses of petroleum wealth.

Keywords: *Environmental violence, Petro-trauma, Niger Delta, Postcolonial theory, Trauma theory, Necropolitics, Helon Habila, Oil on Water, Displacement, Extractive capitalism.*

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria occupies a paradoxical position in the national and global imagination. Endowed with the petroleum reserves that constitute the lifeblood of Nigeria's economy, the Delta has, since colonial extraction began in earnest, been systematically impoverished, ecologically devastated, and politically marginalized. Okonta and Douglas describe the region as constituting "one of the world's most significant ecological and human rights catastrophes," where decades of oil extraction have poisoned waterways, destroyed farmland and fisheries, and stripped communities of their livelihoods (3). This structural condition of dispossession has generated multiple forms of insecurity, from militant insurgency and forced displacement to deep psychological and communal trauma that contemporary Nigerian literature has increasingly sought to document and interpret.

It is within this context of sustained material and symbolic violence that Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) emerges as one of the most formally and politically ambitious literary responses to the Niger Delta crisis. A novel structured around the search for a kidnapped expatriate wife, *Oil on Water* refuses the thriller's promise of resolution, redirecting narrative attention from the ostensible victim to the communities, landscapes, and psychic interiors devastated by decades of petroleum extraction. In doing so, the novel performs a kind of literary reorientation: it insists that the real subject of the Niger Delta crisis is not the drama of hostage-taking, corporate negotiation, or military response, the stories that dominate international media coverage, but the slower, less legible catastrophe of communities dismantled by structural violence. This study takes that reorientation as both its subject and its methodological premise.

It is within this context that Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) assumes particular scholarly significance. As one of the most sustained literary engagements with the human costs of petroleum extraction in West African fiction, the novel deploys the conventions of the journalistic thriller to expose the intertwined operations of ecological devastation, state negligence, corporate impunity, and collective trauma. Habila, himself a native of Gombe State and a journalist by training, brings both an insider's intimacy with Nigerian political realities and an aesthetic rigour refined through his

earlier celebrated fiction, *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) and *Measuring Time* (2007) to his portrayal of a Delta community in crisis.

The novel's narrative is propelled by two journalists, the experienced Zaq and the younger Rufus, who travel into the creeks to investigate the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, the wife of a British oil executive, by a militant group. What begins as an ostensibly straightforward journalistic assignment unfolds into a deeply unsettling confrontation with environmental ruin, political betrayal, and the traumatic dissolution of community. Habila uses the journey motif, a familiar trope in African fiction from Chinua Achebe to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to construct a kind of *descensus ad inferos*, a descent into the accumulated suffering of Niger Delta peoples. As Brinda Bose notes, Habila's fiction consistently interrogates "what it means to survive under conditions of state-sanctioned violence and institutional abandonment" (212).

The critical reception of *Oil on Water* has been substantial. Scholars have approached the text from environmental humanities perspectives, emphasising its "petrofiction" dimensions (Wenzel 2014); from journalistic ethics angles, examining the moral compromises of Zaq and Rufus's reporting (Ogunyemi 2018); and from postcolonial frameworks, interrogating the novel's representation of state and corporate power (Nnodim 2016). However, relatively few studies have adopted an integrated trauma-theory and postcolonial lens to examine how the novel constructs what this study terms "petro-trauma." This study employs Western-derived trauma frameworks, particularly Cathy Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience and Judith Herman's model of complex PTSD not as universalising diagnostic templates, but as critical instruments that are read alongside, and actively complicated by, the Niger Delta's specific communal, ecological, and postcolonial conditions. Where Western trauma theory tends to privilege the individualised, internalised psyche, this study is attentive to the ways in which Habila's text insists on collective, land-based, and intergenerational registers of suffering that exceed those frameworks registers more adequately theorised through Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and Frantz Fanon's atmospheric violence, both thinkers rooted in the African and Third World colonial experience. The analytical move, therefore, is not uncritical importation but productive friction: deploying these frameworks precisely where they illuminate, and noting where the Niger Delta context demands their revision. This gap is the analytical space that the present study seeks to fill.

Despite the considerable body of scholarship on both the Niger Delta crisis and Habila's literary career, there remains a significant analytical gap in the integrated examination of environmental violence, postcolonial governance, and traumatic experience as they are simultaneously constructed and critiqued in *Oil on Water*. Existing studies have tended to isolate one dimension of the novel's concern the ecological, the journalistic, or the political- without adequately accounting for how these dimensions intersect to produce a distinctive and coherent representation of what this study terms petro-trauma. While the concept bears family resemblances to established categories such as environmental trauma, collective trauma, and postcolonial violence, it is not reducible to any one of them, and its analytical value lies precisely in their convergence. Environmental trauma, as theorised in ecocritical scholarship, typically foregrounds the destruction of natural systems and human communities' relationship to land; collective trauma, following Kai Erikson, emphasises the dissolution of communal bonds and shared identity; postcolonial violence addresses the structural legacies of imperial domination. Petro-trauma, as this study deploys the term, names a formation in which all three processes are simultaneously activated and mutually reinforced through one specific mechanism: the extractive logic of the petroleum economy operating within, and enabled by, a postcolonial state that has abandoned its populations to corporate sovereignty. What is distinctive about petro-trauma is not merely its causes, but its structure: the suffering it produces is inseparable from the material substance being extracted, the spatial geography of the creeks, the political economy of oil dependency, and the particular kind of slow, compounding ecological death that petroleum contamination imposes. It is this overdetermined, site-specific, and structurally produced character that warrants petro-trauma as a distinct analytical category rather than a synonym for suffering adjacent to oil.

Furthermore, the novel's formal and narratological strategies, such as its doubled narrative consciousness, its use of polluted landscape as psychic register, and its restrained testimonial prose, have not been adequately theorised in relation to the traumatic content they convey. Following Cathy Caruth's insight that trauma resists conventional narrative recuperation (1996), and Judith Herman's insistence that witness-bearing is central to healing (1992), this study contends that Habila's formal choices are not incidental but constitute a deliberate aesthetics of testimony. It is important to clarify, however, that this theoretical orientation does not seek to subordinate the novel's literary complexity to a predetermined interpretive schema. The risk of over-determining a text through

theory of reading only what one's framework permits one to see is a methodological hazard this study consciously guards against. Accordingly, the theoretical lenses of trauma studies and postcolonial criticism are deployed heuristically: as tools for illuminating the text's concerns, not as grids that flatten its ambiguities. Where the novel resists, exceeds, or ironises the frameworks brought to bear upon it, those moments of friction are treated not as inconveniences but as the most analytically productive sites of inquiry. The study therefore remains committed to close reading as its primary method, ensuring that theoretical argument is always answerable to the specific texture of Habila's prose, characterisation, and narrative structure. Addressing these interconnected lacunae requires an analytical framework that simultaneously engages trauma theory and postcolonial criticism, reading the text's content and form in relation to one another.

This study aims to provide a rigorous analysis of the representation of environmental violence, displacement, and trauma in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, situating the novel within intersecting frameworks of trauma theory and postcolonial criticism. Specifically, the study pursues the following objectives: to analyse how the novel constructs environmental violence as a systemic and structural condition rooted in postcolonial governance and corporate extractivism; to examine the representation of individual and collective trauma among Niger Delta communities as depicted in the narrative; to apply Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics and Frantz Fanon's notion of structural violence to the novel's representation of state and corporate power; and to evaluate *Oil on Water* as a literary form of counter-archiving: a narrative intervention against the erasure of Delta communities from official discourse.

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in close textual analysis and interpretive literary criticism. The primary text is Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010). The study employs trauma theory, drawing principally on the work of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra, and postcolonial theory, engaging the frameworks of Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, as its dual theoretical lenses. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and monographs from African literary studies, postcolonial studies, environmental humanities, and trauma studies. The methodology is explicitly interdisciplinary, recognising that the novel's concerns span literary aesthetics, political ecology, and psychology in ways that resist single-discipline containment. The decision to focus exclusively on *Oil on Water*, rather than undertaking a comparative study of Niger Delta fiction, is a deliberate

methodological choice rather than an oversight. A single-text study permits the depth of close reading and sustained theoretical engagement that a comparative approach would necessarily compromise. Moreover, *Oil on Water* is uniquely positioned within Niger Delta literature as a text that simultaneously addresses environmental violence, journalistic complicity, communal trauma, and formal aesthetics in a sustained and integrated way qualities that make it an especially rich site for the kind of layered analysis this study undertakes. Where relevant, the study draws on contextual references to other Niger Delta texts and authors including works by Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Kaine Agary not to conduct formal comparison, but to situate Habila's representational choices within a broader literary-political field. The findings are therefore offered as a contribution to Niger Delta literary studies rather than as comprehensive generalisations about the entire corpus.

This study makes several contributions to existing scholarship. First, it advances the field of African trauma studies by theorising "petro-trauma" as a distinct analytical category applicable to literary representations of extractive violence in the Global South. Second, it enriches postcolonial literary criticism of contemporary Nigerian fiction by demonstrating how Habila's novel deploys formal strategies such as narrative doubling, landscape aestheticisation, and testimonial restraint as modes of bearing witness to politically suppressed histories. Third, by reading *Oil on Water* through the lens of Mbembe's necropolitics, the study extends the application of that concept beyond its primarily African political philosophy context into literary analysis, demonstrating its explanatory power for fiction dealing with resource governance and disposability. Crucially, however, the study's theoretical ambition is counterbalanced by an equal commitment to the novel's irreducible literary identity. Throughout, the analysis attends to those dimensions of *Oil on Water*, its irony, its narrative silences, its morally unresolved characters that refuse easy theoretical assimilation. In this respect, the study does not treat theory as a master key but as one mode of sustained attention among others, subordinate at every point to the interpretive demands of the text itself. The contribution is therefore as much literary-critical as it is theoretical: a demonstration that rigorous engagement with a novel's aesthetic specificity and rigorous theoretical analysis are not competing imperatives but mutually reinforcing ones.

Finally, the study speaks to urgent contemporary debates about environmental justice, corporate accountability, and the politics of memory in postcolonial Africa.

This study focuses exclusively on Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) as its primary literary text. While comparative analysis with other Niger Delta literary works such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), Tanure Ojaide's poetry, or Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) would yield valuable insights, the scope of a single study necessitates focus. The geographical focus is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, with particular attention to the political ecology of oil extraction. The study does not engage extensively with empirical or sociological data on displacement and mental health in the Delta; its mode of inquiry is literary and theoretical rather than empirical. These boundaries are acknowledged as productive constraints that enable depth of analysis within a defined terrain.

Literature Review

This chapter provides the conceptual and theoretical scaffolding for the study. It surveys the historical and political context of the Niger Delta crisis, establishing the real-world conditions that Habila's novel fictionalises. It further reviews existing scholarship on *Oil on Water*, identifying critical trends and gaps, and elaborates the theoretical frameworks of trauma theory and postcolonial criticism, respectively, as they are deployed in the analysis.

The Niger Delta Crisis: Historical and Political Context

The Niger Delta has been central to Nigeria's economic survival since the discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1956. Oil revenues account for approximately 80 percent of government income and over 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings (Frynas 2000: 22). Yet the communities atop the Delta's petroleum reserves have experienced what scholars consistently describe as a “resource curse”: a paradox in which natural resource abundance generates poverty, ecological destruction, and violent conflict rather than development (Auty 1993; Watts 2004). Okonta and Douglas catalogue the consequences with precision: “oil spills, gas flares, acid rain, the pollution of rivers and creeks, the destruction of farmland and forests” (2003: 3), all of which have been documented by organisations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The political dimensions of this crisis are inseparable from its ecology. The Revenue Allocation Act and successive Nigerian constitutions have concentrated petroleum rents in the federal government, diverting funds away from the producing states and communities. Watts argues that the result is “a particular form of governmentality” in which oil-producing communities are simultaneously crucial to national wealth and rendered politically marginal (2004: 51). Apter

similarly describes Nigeria's oil economy as generating "a split between apparent wealth and real impoverishment" (2005: 27), a structural contradiction that has fuelled decades of militant agitation.

Militant groups including the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta Vigilante, and various armed factions emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as responses to this structural exclusion. Their activities have included pipeline vandalism, kidnappings of oil workers, and attacks on military installations. The Nigerian state's counter-responses have frequently involved disproportionate military violence against civilian communities, most infamously exemplified by the 1995 execution of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders. This history of state violence against Niger Delta communities forms the immediate political backdrop of Habila's novel.

Review of Existing Scholarship on Oil on Water

Scholarship on Oil on Water has developed along several important lines. From the environmental humanities, Jennifer Wenzel situates the novel within the genre of "petrofiction" defined as narratives that grapple with "the experience of living in a petroleum culture" (2014: 3). For Wenzel, Habila's contribution lies in making visible the human costs that mainstream petrofiction, associated by Amitav Ghosh (1992) primarily with Western forms, habitually obscures. Wenzel reads the novel's landscape descriptions as a form of "ecological witness," documenting environmental devastation with a precision that gives it the force of legal testimony.

From the perspective of journalistic ethics, Chibueze Ogunyemi (2018) analyses the moral ambiguity of Rufus and Zaq as journalist-protagonists. Ogunyemi argues that Habila uses the figure of the journalist to interrogate the ethical contradictions of bearing witness: the simultaneous necessity and inadequacy of documentation in contexts of overwhelming suffering. This reading resonates with Susan Sontag's arguments in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) about the limits of photographic and journalistic testimony, and extends them into the literary domain.

Rashida Nnodim (2016) provides one of the most theoretically sophisticated readings to date, situating the novel within the postcolonial politics of visibility and invisibility. Nnodim argues that Habila's Delta communities occupy a condition of enforced invisibility present in the global imagination primarily as sites of resource extraction, absent as subjects with histories, desires, and rights. For Nnodim, the novel's narrative act is fundamentally one of rendering the invisible visible.

Despite these valuable contributions, the existing scholarship has not adequately theorised the intersections between trauma, postcolonial abandonment, and literary form in the novel. Psychological trauma, individual and collective, receives only passing attention in most studies, while the application of Mbembe's necropolitics to the novel's political ecology remains underdeveloped. The present study addresses these gaps by foregrounding the category of petro-trauma and subjecting the novel's traumatic content and formal choices to sustained theoretical analysis.

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory offers indispensable tools for reading the psychic dimensions of *Oil on Water*. Cathy Caruth, drawing on Freud's notion of the traumatic neurosis, defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1995: 11). For Caruth, trauma is constitutively resistant to representation: it cannot be fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence and returns, belatedly and fragmentarily, in ways that disrupt the coherence of narrative and selfhood. She coins the phrase "unclaimed experience" to describe this condition of a past that cannot be properly owned or integrated (1996: 4). This concept is central to understanding why the communities Habila depicts cannot straightforwardly narrate their suffering.

Judith Herman's clinical framework extends Caruth's philosophical account into the realm of psychological practice. Herman distinguishes between simple and complex trauma, with complex trauma arising from prolonged, repeated experiences of violation, precisely the condition of Niger Delta communities subject to decades of oil spills, military incursions, and social disintegration. Her triphasic recovery model safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life provides a framework for evaluating what forms of healing are and are not available to the novel's characters (1992: 155). Herman's insistence that "recovery can take place only within the context of relationships" (1992: 133) illuminates the significance of community dissolution in *Oil on Water*.

Dominick LaCapra contributes the important distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma. In acting out, the traumatized subject is "possessed by the past and tends to repeat it compulsively" (2001: 141), while working through involves achieving a critical distance from traumatic experience without denial or normalisation. LaCapra also theorises "empathic unsettlement" as an ethical mode of secondary witness-bearing, applicable to authors like Habila who

engage with trauma not directly their own (2001: 40). This concept is relevant for evaluating Habila's narrative positioning as a writer documenting Delta suffering from a degree of geographical and social remove.

Kai Erikson's concept of "collective trauma", "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people" (1995: 187) is also central to this study, as it captures the communal rather than merely individual dimensions of the trauma Habila represents. Unlike personal trauma, collective trauma "is not merely the aggregate of individual traumatic experiences but a qualitative transformation of the community's sense of itself, its trust in the social order, and its capacity for collective action" (Erikson 1995: 190). This concept maps directly onto the fractured communities of Oil on Water.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory provides the political and historical framework within which the novel's traumatic content must be situated. Frantz Fanon's analysis in *The Wretched of the Earth* remains foundational. Fanon's central insight that colonial and postcolonial violence is not aberrant but systemic that it is, as he writes, "the atmosphere, sometimes the odour itself" of colonial situations (1963: 38), is directly applicable to the Niger Delta, where violence inheres not only in militant attacks but in the slow, continuous violence of oil contamination and state neglect. Fanon's concept of the "zone of non-being," the condition of dehumanization into which the colonized are cast, maps onto the Delta communities' experience of enforced disposability.

Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, developed in his 2003 essay of that title and elaborated in subsequent work, extends Foucault's biopolitics into contexts where state power is exercised not through the management of life but through the management of death. For Mbembe, the sovereign "is the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (2003: 11). The concept of the "death-world" "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 2003: 40), is particularly resonant for the oil-impacted communities of Habila's novel, who survive in an environment that has been systematically rendered lethal.

Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry and hybridity illuminates the ambivalent positions occupied by characters like Rufus, who inhabits the cultural and institutional spaces of both Nigerian officialdom and Delta community. For Bhabha, mimicry is "almost the same but not quite" (1994: 86),

a relation of resemblance that simultaneously unsettles the authority it appears to replicate. The concept of the “Third Space”, an interstitial zone of cultural negotiation, is relevant to the novel’s representation of characters caught between competing loyalties and identities. Gayatri Spivak’s insistence on the silencing of subaltern voices within dominant discourses is similarly pertinent: the communities of *Oil on Water* are visible to the state and to corporations, but their testimony, their suffering, and their perspective are systematically excluded from the dominant petroleum discourse.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Environmental Violence and Structural Abandonment in *Oil On Water*

The representation of environmental violence and structural abandonment in *Oil on Water*. Constructs environmental devastation not as a backdrop or setting for his narrative but as a form of political statement: the degraded Delta landscape is simultaneously the consequence and the ongoing mechanism of postcolonial governance failure. Drawing on Mbembe’s necropolitics and Fanon’s concept of structural violence, the novel situates ecological destruction within a political economy of extractive capitalism in which Niger Delta communities are rendered disposable.

The Landscape as Political Text

From its opening pages, *Oil on Water* establishes the Niger Delta landscape as a space of systematic ecological violation. Habila’s imagery does not aestheticise nature in the manner of the nature writing tradition; instead, it insistently registers pollution and destruction as evidence of political failure. The creeks through which Rufus and Zaq travel are not picturesque waterways but repositories of industrial waste:

The creeks were narrow and shallow in places; the water was dark, darker than I expected, and whenever the boat stirred the water it left an oily, rainbow-coloured surface in its wake. On the banks, mangrove trees still stood, but they were coated with crude oil up to where the tide line reached. (Habila 2010: 16)

This passage repays close attention. The “oily, rainbow-coloured surface,” an image that combines a natural phenomenon (the rainbow) with the mark of industrial contamination, is characteristic of Habila’s technique of defamiliarisation: making the reader see familiar natural imagery as evidence of violation. The mangroves “coated with crude oil” are both beautiful and dying, their survival rendered conditional on their tolerance of the very substance that poisons them. This is Mbembe’s

“death-world” rendered at the level of ecology: a landscape in which the conditions of life and death are fused.

The landscape's political significance is made explicit when Habila links ecological degradation to the failure of postcolonial governance. Communities like Irikefe, the fictionalised Delta village central to the novel, have been abandoned by the state and by the oil companies whose operations have destroyed the natural resources upon which communal life depended. Habila writes:

The village of Irikefe had once been thriving; the people had built their lives around the creeks, fishing and farming. Now the fish were gone, poisoned by years of oil spills, and the farmland had been swallowed by the advancing salt water caused by the dredging of new channels for the oil pipes. (Habila 2010: 67)

This passage enacts what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence”, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (2011: 2). The destruction of Irikefe's fishing and farming economies is not the product of a single violent event but of the accumulated effects of extraction: oil spills repeated over decades, dredging operations that alter hydrological systems, gas flaring that contributes to acid rain. The state's role is one of active negligence: the failure to regulate, to remediate, or to compensate. As Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the postcolonial state frequently inherits the colonial tendency to treat productive territories as sites of extraction rather than communities deserving of protection (1963: 120).

The Politics of the Fire and the Gas Flare

Habila returns repeatedly to the image of the gas flare, the burning off of natural gas at extraction sites as a symbol of both environmental violence and political indifference. Gas flaring has been practiced in the Niger Delta since the 1950s, releasing toxic compounds into the atmosphere and casting a perpetual orange glow over affected communities. It has been banned in Nigeria since 1984, yet has continued largely unabated, with fines for non-compliance set so low as to be economically negligible for major oil companies. Habila uses the gas flare to crystallise the novel's political argument:

In the distance, in the direction of the oil company's flow station, the gas flare burned endlessly, like a distress signal from a ship that had been burning for so long that people had ceased to look at it anymore. (Habila 2010: 89)

The simile is devastating in its precision. A distress signal exists to attract attention and to provoke rescue; the gas flare's resemblance to such a signal acknowledges the community's need for intervention. But "people had ceased to look at it anymore" a failure of attention that implicates not only the Nigerian state and oil companies but the wider international community, including the consumers of petroleum in the Global North. Habila's narrative thus positions the gas flare as an emblem of what Spivak might call the subaltern's failed speech act: the Delta community speaks its distress through the medium of the flare, but the world has learned not to hear.

The burned villages that Rufus and Zaq encounter as they travel deeper into the Delta extend this imagery of fire from the ecological to the human. Military operations against militant communities have frequently involved the burning of villages, a tactic with colonial antecedents that Fanon analyses as a mechanism of collective punishment designed to destroy community infrastructure and solidarity (1963: 46). In *Oil on Water*, these burned landscapes become palimpsests of state violence:

We passed a village that had been burned to the ground, the walls of the huts still standing like broken teeth, the roofs gone, and in the compound, the ruins of a car and a generator, and over everything, the smell of ash. (Habila 2010: 103)

The image of "broken teeth" anthropomorphises the ruined landscape, giving the village a body that has suffered violence a technique that prepares the reader to understand environmental destruction as a form of violence against persons. The "smell of ash" is a sensory detail that draws the reader into the scene's traumatic residue, evoking the aftermath of catastrophe.

Corporate Complicity and the Postcolonial State

Oil on Water does not permit the separation of corporate and state violence. Throughout the narrative, the operations of the fictional oil company clearly modelled on Shell Nigeria are presented as inextricable from the operations of the Nigerian state. Military escorts accompany company representatives; soldiers protect pipelines at the expense of protecting communities. This fusion of state and corporate interest reflects what Watts describes as "the oil complex", "a specific political ecology of violence and resource control that structures political and social life" in the Delta (2004: 51).

Habila dramatises this complicity most explicitly in Rufus's encounter with company representatives, who speak the language of corporate social responsibility while their operations continue to devastate the surrounding environment. Their rhetoric is a form of what Bhabha calls

mimicry: an adoption of the discourse of international development and human rights that serves primarily to screen ongoing extraction from scrutiny. The company's public relations speak of "partnership" with communities whose livelihoods have been destroyed by the very partnership they describe. Habila's ironic narration makes this contradiction legible without rendering it simplistic.

Mbembe's necropolitics illuminates this arrangement with particular clarity. The Nigerian state's decision to protect oil infrastructure while leaving communities exposed to environmental and militant violence constitutes, in Mbembe's terms, a decision about who may live and who must die or more precisely, about whose living conditions are politically legible and whose are not. The Delta community's exposure to pollution, to military violence, and to militant attack is not a failure of governance but a consistent expression of a governance logic that identifies valuable populations with those who control or benefit from oil revenue, and expendable populations with those who merely inhabit the oil-producing landscape.

Trauma, Displacement, and Communal Rupture in *Oil on Water*

This section turns from the political ecology of environmental violence to its psychological and social consequences. Drawing on the trauma theoretical framework elaborated in the review above, this section analyses how *Oil on Water* represents individual and collective trauma among Niger Delta communities. The analysis attends to the novel's representation of displacement, communal rupture, and the psychic costs of prolonged exposure to violence and ecological devastation. It argues that Habila's novel constitutes a sustained literary engagement with what this study terms petro-trauma: a form of collective psychological damage that is specific to communities inhabiting extractive zones and that combines the ecological, the political, and the psychic.

Individual Trauma and the Disruption of Narrative Identity

The novel's representation of individual trauma is most concentrated in the figure of the nameless woman whom Rufus encounters in an abandoned village. Having survived a military attack in which her husband and children were killed, she has retreated into near-total silence, inhabiting the ruins of her former home. Habila's description of her is remarkable for its clinical precision:

She sat in the ruins of the compound with her back against the wall, her legs stretched out before her, and she did not look up when we entered. She was beyond fear, beyond grief; she had passed through these and come out the other side into a stillness that was not peace. (Habila 2010: 78)

Herman's triphasic model of trauma response is legible here. The woman's stillness corresponds to what Herman calls the phase of constriction or "numbing": a defensive psychic withdrawal that occurs when the nervous system is overwhelmed by repeated or prolonged exposure to violence (1992: 86). The phrase "beyond fear, beyond grief" the use of "beyond" twice in rapid succession conveys a state that exceeds the vocabulary of ordinary emotional experience. Her silence is not the silence of recovery but of what Caruth would call the "unclaimed experience": a trauma so total that it cannot be narrativised, cannot be owned, cannot be integrated into a coherent life-story.

This disruption of narrative identity is evidenced in the self's capacity to situate itself within a meaningful temporal sequence of past, present, and future is a recurring motif in *Oil on Water*. Characters who have undergone acute trauma are frequently represented as unable to tell their stories in a linear, integrated fashion. Testimonies are fragmented, interrupted, and circled back upon — a formal choice that enacts, at the level of narration, the traumatic structure of the content. As LaCapra argues, the aesthetics of witness-bearing should not impose a false coherence on traumatic experience but should "convey a feel for the problem" while resisting the "full narrativization or harmonization" that would domesticate or close off the trauma (2001: 186).

Collective Trauma and the Dissolution of Community

Oil on Water is equally attentive to the communal dimensions of trauma. Erikson's definition of collective trauma as a blow to the "basic tissues of social life" (1995: 187) is directly applicable to the Delta communities Habila depicts, whose social fabric has been shredded by decades of ecological destruction and episodic violence. The dissolution of communal bonds manifests in multiple registers within the novel.

The destruction of the fishing economy is, for Habila, not merely an economic loss but an anthropological one. Fishing in the Delta is not simply a mode of livelihood but a culture: a system of seasonal rhythms, inherited knowledge, kinship networks, and ritual practices that constitute the community's relationship to its environment. When oil contamination poisons the creeks, it destroys not only fish stocks but the entire cultural formation organised around their harvest. Habila captures this double loss in the testimony of an elder:

My father taught me to read the water, to know by the colour of the sky and the movement of the birds when the fish would run. Now the birds are gone, the water is black, and I have nothing to teach my son. (Habila 2010: 94)

The elder's lament is simultaneously ecological, economic, and intergenerational. The severing of the transmission of knowledge from father to son as seen in "I have nothing to teach my son" represents what Erikson calls the "corrosion of community" (1995: 192): the destruction of the social mechanisms by which collective identity is reproduced across generations. Without the knowledge-practices through which the community has constituted itself in relation to its environment, the community's sense of historical continuity is fractured. This is, in LaCapra's terms, a form of collective acting out: a compulsive dwelling in a traumatic present from which any future appears foreclosed. The displacement of communities following military operations and militant attacks compounds this dissolution. Internally displaced persons in *Oil on Water* are represented not simply as victims of discrete violent events but as communities in the process of social disintegration. The crowded displacement camps that Rufus visits characterised by inadequate food, absent medical provision, and the enforced idleness of people separated from their means of livelihood constitute what Agamben might call "bare life": life stripped of its social, cultural, and political dimensions and reduced to mere biological survival. Habila's presentation of these camps resists the sentimentality that might domesticate their horror; his documentation is precise and unflinching.

Militancy as Traumatic Response

A significant contribution of *Oil on Water* to the literary representation of the Niger Delta crisis is its refusal to reduce militancy to simple criminality or ideological fanaticism. Habila situates the emergence of militant groups within the traumatic history of communal dispossession, offering what might be read as a traumatological explanation for radicalisation. The militant leader whom Rufus encounters is represented as a man shaped by specific experiences of loss and betrayal rather than as an abstract embodiment of violence.

The leader's narrative, his account of how the oil company destroyed his father's fishing grounds, how the government deployed soldiers against his village when residents protested, how his own engagement with legal and political channels of redress was systematically frustrated follows the arc that Herman identifies in the development of complex trauma responses (1992: 121). Prolonged exposure to injustice, to the failure of institutional redress, and to direct violence produces

what Herman calls “learned helplessness” at the individual level, and what Fanon analyses as the turn to counter-violence at the collective level. Fanon's argument that “the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” (1963: 44) whatever its philosophical complexities capture something of the logic by which dispossessed Delta youth have moved from protest to armed resistance.

Habila does not romantically endorse this trajectory; the novel is clear-eyed about the suffering that militant violence inflicts on the very communities it claims to defend. But by situating militancy within a history of structural violence and traumatic dispossession, he refuses the decontextualised criminalisation that dominates official and mainstream media discourse on the Delta crisis. This is itself a form of counter-archiving: the restoration of causal context to a phenomenon that official narratives prefer to present as inexplicable.

The Journalist as Traumatized Witness

Rufus and Zaq's dual narrative consciousness functions not only as a structural device but as a means of exploring the ethics and psychology of secondary witness-bearing. Zaq experienced, alcoholic, world-weary represents a form of witness-bearing that has degenerated into what LaCapra calls “acting out”: an inability to metabolise the accumulated suffering he has documented, which manifests in self-destructive behaviour and cynical detachment. His alcoholism is both symptom and coping mechanism, a form of chemical constriction that anaesthetises the emotional impact of continuous exposure to atrocity.

Rufus, by contrast, is in the process of learning what bearing witness entails, and the novel is, among other things, a narrative of his traumatic education. As he moves deeper into the Delta, his professional detachment, his journalistic training to observe and report without being affected is progressively eroded. The question the novel poses, through Rufus's experience, is whether genuine witness-bearing is compatible with professional distance, or whether it requires a degree of affective exposure that conventional journalism cannot accommodate. This question resonates with the broader debates, in trauma studies and documentary ethics, about the costs of secondary witness for those who document suffering.

LaCapra's concept of “empathic unsettlement” is illuminating here. For LaCapra, genuine witness-bearing requires “being responsive to the traumatic experience of others,” which involves neither “identification” (collapsing the distinction between self and other) nor “objectification”

(maintaining a distance that forecloses genuine engagement) (2001: 40). Rufus's journey traces an arc from initial objectification toward something closer to empathic unsettlement, though the novel resists any easy resolution, any sense that the experience of witness-bearing has been successfully integrated. The narrative ends with Rufus leaving the Delta, but his departure is not cathartic; it carries with it the weight of what cannot be taken away, what cannot be adequately represented or transmitted.

***Oil on Water* as Counter-Archive and Testimony**

This section analyses *Oil on Water's* representation of environmental violence and collective trauma. It turns to the novel's mode of address, its self-understanding as a form of literary testimony and counter-archiving, and asks what work the novel performs as a cultural and political intervention. Drawing on insights from memory studies, postcolonial theory, and the theory of trauma narrative, it argues that Habila's formal choices his hybridised narrative voice, his testimonial restraint, his insistence on naming the unnamed constitute a deliberate aesthetics of witness that functions to restore historical visibility to communities rendered invisible by dominant petroleum discourse.

Against Erasure: Memory and Counter-Archiving

Official discourse on the Niger Delta, whether emanating from the Nigerian government, oil companies, or mainstream international media, has consistently privileged quantitative and economic registers: barrels of oil produced, revenue percentages, GDP contributions. Within this discourse, the communities atop the Delta's oil reserves appear primarily as logistical complications, sources of militant disruption, claimants of compensation, obstacles to smooth extraction. Their cultural life, their histories, their psychological suffering, and their claims to justice are systematically marginalised within a discourse organised around the commodity they happen to inhabit.

Habila's novel performs what this study calls counter-archiving: the construction of an alternative textual record that preserves the testimony of communities whose experience is excluded from official documentation. The term "archive" is used here in the extended sense developed by Derrida (1996) and applied to literary texts by Ann Laura Stoler (2002): not merely a repository of documents but a system for the organisation of what is worth remembering, what can be spoken, and what must be forgotten. Dominant petroleum discourse constitutes an archive in this sense — an

ordering of knowledge that systematically excludes the testimony of the dispossessed. *Oil on Water* inserts itself into this archival economy as a disruptive counter-record.

It is necessary at this point to address a methodological question that bears directly on the study's claims: given that the primary method is close textual analysis of a work of fiction, how persuasive are the connections drawn between Habila's novel and the actual historical, political, and ecological realities of the Niger Delta crisis? The study does not conflate fictional representation with empirical documentation, nor does it treat the novel as a transparent window onto Niger Delta experience. Literary texts are not sociological datasets, and the epistemological status of claims derived from fiction must be carefully distinguished from those grounded in ethnographic, historical, or ecological evidence. The study's argument, therefore, is not that *Oil on Water* accurately records the Niger Delta crisis in the manner of journalism or historiography, but rather that it represents in the sense of giving form, visibility, and affective weight to conditions that are extensively corroborated by non-literary sources.

The novel's portrayal of oil spill devastation, community displacement, militant insurgency, and state-corporate collusion is substantiated by a substantial body of empirical scholarship: environmental impact assessments published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP 2011), human rights documentation by Amnesty International and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), and academic studies in political ecology and development studies (Watts 2004; Obi 2010; Idemudia 2012). The study mobilises this contextual evidence not to verify the novel's claims sentence by sentence, but to establish the historical plausibility of the representational landscape within which Habila's aesthetic and ethical choices operate. What close reading illuminates, in this framework, is not the facts of the crisis but the cultural, psychological, and political logic through which those facts are experienced, suppressed, narrated, and contested dimensions that empirical methods alone are ill-equipped to access. Literature, on this account, does not substitute for historical evidence; it performs a different and complementary cognitive work, one that this study treats as both analytically legitimate and critically indispensable.

The novel's insistence on naming specific villages, specific practices, specific forms of loss operates as an act of archival rescue. Irikefe, though fictional, is constructed with sufficient anthropological and geographical specificity to function as a representative of the many real communities such as Ogoniland, Otuegwe, Bodo whose histories of oil contamination and state

violence are inadequately documented in official records. Habila's precision of observation such as the colour of the contaminated water, the species of dying mangroves, the layout of burned compounds gives the novel the texture of documentation even as it operates within the conventions of fiction.

Narrative Form as Ethical Choice

The hybridised narrative form of *Oil on Water* part journalistic thriller, part environmental novel, part trauma narrative is not merely an aesthetic choice but an ethical one. By importing the conventions of genre fiction (the kidnapping plot, the journey narrative) and subjecting them to the pressures of traumatic content that refuses easy resolution, Habila produces a text that challenges its readers' generic expectations in ways that enact the difficulty of engaging with Niger Delta suffering.

The novel's ending is instructive in this regard. Rufus secures his story like the information about Isabel Floode, but the story he eventually writes is not the one he set out to find. What he has encountered in the Delta cannot be contained within the conventions of the kidnapping narrative; it exceeds the generic frame and demands a different mode of address. His return to the city does not constitute a resolution of the traumatic content he has witnessed; the novel refuses the consolations of narrative closure that would allow both protagonist and reader to leave the Delta behind. This refusal is, in LaCapra's terms, a form of working through rather than acting out: an acknowledgment that the trauma cannot be fully integrated, but that this incompleteness is itself an ethical response to the magnitude of what has been witnessed.

Oil on Water and the Politics of Literary Witness

Habila's positioning as a witness-author in *Oil on Water* raises the question of literary ethics that runs through postcolonial debates about who has the right, and the responsibility to represent communities whose experiences are not one's own. Habila is not from the Niger Delta; he is, in cultural and geographical terms, an outsider to the crisis he documents. This positioning has both risks and responsibilities.

The risk is what LaCapra calls inappropriate appropriation: the substitution of an outsider's narrative for the testimony of those who have directly experienced the trauma, a substitution that can inadvertently reinforce the erasure it intends to oppose by inserting the outside perspective as the authoritative account. Habila negotiates this risk through formal choices that foreground the limitations of his narrative access. Rufus's perspective is consistently partial; the communities he

encounters retain an opacity that resists his and the reader's desire for complete comprehension. The testimonies that punctuate the narrative are presented in ways that preserve their independence from Rufus's interpretive framework.

The responsibility and, ultimately, the achievement of *Oil on Water* is to have produced a work that functions as what Bhabha calls "dissemiNation" (1994: 139): a scattering of narratives that disturbs the homogeneity of dominant national discourse. Within a Nigerian public sphere that has consistently marginalised Delta voices in favour of the economic and security imperatives of oil extraction, Habila's novel inserts an insistent counter-narrative that refuses to resolve itself into comfort or closure.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) as a literary intervention into the crisis of environmental violence, displacement, and collective trauma in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Through the complementary lenses of trauma theory and postcolonial criticism, the analysis has demonstrated that the novel's engagement with the human costs of petroleum extraction is simultaneously political, psychological, and formal, a work that refuses to aestheticise suffering while insisting on the aesthetic as a mode of testimony.

Central to the study's argument is the concept of "petro-trauma," developed here to describe the distinctive form of ecological, political, and psychic damage inflicted upon communities inhabiting extraction zones. Habila's degraded Delta landscape such as its poisoned creeks, extinguished gas flares, and burned villages is not incidental scenery but a political text, registering what Achille Mbembe's necropolitics identifies as the postcolonial state's systematic decision to render oil-producing communities disposable. The state and the multinational corporation are shown to operate not in tension but in alignment, jointly maintaining the conditions of what Mbembe terms the "death-world": an environment in which survival is precarious and communal life is rendered politically illegible.

The traumatic consequences of this structural arrangement are traced at both individual and communal levels. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's notion of the "unclaimed experience" and Judith Herman's triphasic model of trauma response, the study has read Habila's characters like the unnamed woman immobilised in the ruins of her compound, the elder severed from the knowledge he cannot transmit, the militant shaped by decades of institutional betrayal as figures whose

suffering exceeds individual pathology and constitutes a collective wound. Kai Erikson's concept of collective trauma, understood as a blow to the "basic tissues of social life," captures the novel's insistence that what has been damaged in the Delta is not merely livelihood or infrastructure but the very fabric of communal identity, memory, and futurity.

The study has also argued that *Oil on Water* performs the work of counter-archiving: constructing, against the dominant petroleum discourse that reduces Delta communities to logistical complications, an alternative record that preserves the testimony of the dispossessed. Habila's formal choices such as his hybridised narrative voice, his resistance to closure, his foregrounding of the limits of the outsider's perspective are read not as aesthetic idiosyncrasies but as ethical decisions shaped by the demands of traumatic content. Following Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement," the study contends that genuine literary witness-bearing requires neither identification with nor detachment from the suffering it documents, but a sustained and formally enacted engagement with its irreducibility.

It can therefore be argued that, *Oil on Water* reveals what literature can do that sociological and journalistic documentation cannot: restore subjectivity and with it, moral and political legibility to communities rendered invisible by the logic of extraction. Its significance extends beyond the Niger Delta, speaking to the condition of dispossessed resource communities globally and to the wider question of what literary form owes to histories of structural violence. Future scholarship would benefit from three directions opened by this study. First, the concept of petro-trauma invites comparative extension across petrostate literatures, from the oil fictions of the Gulf, Venezuela, and the Caucasus to test whether the psychic and ecological formations identified here constitute a globally recognisable genre of extraction trauma. Second, sustained formal analysis remains underdeveloped in African trauma narrative scholarship, where thematic readings continue to dominate; closer attention to narrative structure, voice, and temporality would enrich the field considerably. Third, Niger Delta fiction remains underrepresented in international environmental humanities discourse, despite its theoretical and political urgency; its integration into ecocritical and slow violence frameworks would be mutually transformative for African literary studies and the environmental humanities alike.

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