



Petroculture In The Anthropocene: Environmental Devastation In Helon Habila's *Oil On Water*

Rohini R, Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore

Dr. V. Uma Devi, Associate Professor, Department of English, Government Arts College, Coimbatore.

Abstract:

The dependence on oil has developed into a modern culture that permeates every aspect of life on earth. Petroculture emerges as a base dimension in the post-modern world as oil serves as the base ingredient of human life. Environment devastation is a pressing issue characterized by widespread destruction of ecosystems, deforestation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity. The high need of the hour is to mitigate the impact of environmental degradation and protect the planet for future generations. Oil pollution is a significant environmental threat caused by oil spills from transportation accidents, offshore drilling, and illegal dumping. The adverse effect transposes to contamination of water bodies, harming marine life, and damaging ecosystems. The petrofiction *Oil on Water* written by Helon Habila places the central issue of oil spillages in the Niger Delta. This paper focuses on Petroculture in the routine life of inhabitants of the Niger Delta as portrayed in Habila's *Oil on Water*.

Keywords: Petroculture, anthropocentrism, oil spillages, environment.

In the heat of global warming, in the light of unexpected seasonal changes, in the weight of dumping, in the flight of chemicals, the earth reached the saturation point and still with the need to embrace creatures, earth rebuilds sustainability on its own. In the universe of transmitters and humanoids, nature gets less attention. The blues and greens are noticed minimally and the slighter attention emerges as red alerts. Globally, the entire mankind is affected by the imbalanced environment due to anthropocentric

activities. Not a particular group alone, every individual in the world faces man-made calamities like scarcity of water, carbon emission, and polluting substances in the environment. The problem in the world against nature is equally shared.

Earth's seventy percent of its portion is covered with water. Water has no alternatives and still the scientist's search for extraterrestrial life prioritizes planets with water. The agent of polluting water does not stop with one as the inventions of man are huge. The effects of water pollution result in the degradation of the environment, terminal extinction, and phyletic extinction of aquatic species and bring dangerous breakdown on human health.

The major threat to oceans is the oil spillages. Oil has become an essential part of human life in the postmodern era. Historically, the Industrial Revolution brought out the importance of oil and the results of the revolution converted oil into dollars. Oil plays a major role in the economic growth of a country. While renewable energy sources like solar and wind are growing, they have not yet reached a point where they can completely replace oil. Developing countries especially may lack the infrastructure for widespread adoption of renewables, making them reliant on traditional sources like oil.

The failure to use oil effectively results in oil spillages. Oil spillages bring about a lot of dangerous breakdowns to the aquatic species and they affect the air, land, water, and humans. Oil spills disrupt the delicate balance of ocean ecosystems. Phytoplankton, the base of the marine food chain, can be smothered by oil, leading to a ripple effect of starvation throughout the food web. It also lingers for more years on the land as some oil components are persistent and can accumulate in the bodies of marine organisms. The people near oil wells also face a long-term effect that affects them genetically.

Oil spills can be devastating to the ocean environment, causing widespread damage to marine life, ecosystems, and even human economies. The cleaning up of contaminated water is the greatest challenge to man. It takes a longer process according to the density of the oil, weather conditions, and sea state. Even after the visible oil disappears, toxic components can persist in the environment for years, harming wildlife. The psychological impact of oil spills on the coastal communities is huge as the livelihood is disrupted, and the emotional toll of witnessing environmental damage can be profound.

Nigeria, the oil repository of Africa has an intertwined culture of praising natural elements in all their art forms. Their narratives often personify natural elements, imbuing them with human characteristics and praising their power and beauty. Nigerians celebrate various festivals throughout the year that are connected to agricultural cycles, weather patterns, and natural phenomena. These celebrations often involve thanksgiving rituals and acknowledge the dependence of human life on the bounty of nature. Antithetical, at present it faces environmental degradation, depletion of natural sources, and infertility in land and humans.

Globally, Nigeria holds the pride of being the sixth-largest producer of crude oil and the first in Africa. The United Nations Environment Programme brings the history of Ogoni land's oil history and torches the darker side of Nigeria by quoting, "The oilfields and installations have since largely remained dormant. However, major oil pipelines still cross through Ogoniland and oil spills continue to affect the region, due to such factors as a lack of maintenance and vandalism to oil infrastructure and facilities. Environmental contamination in Ogoniland from oil spills remains untreated, or only partially remediated, today" (UNEP 2017). The life of inhabitants in the coastal area is disrupted and they find no answer to all their disturbing livelihood.

The usage of fossil fuel has doubled in the usage since the 1980s as it is considered an important factor in generating electricity for the photochemical industry. The carbon emission from extracting fossil fuel can be a major threat to climate change. The US Environment Protecting Agency brings the shocking report that "From 1990 to 2019, the total warming effect from greenhouse gases added by humans to the Earth's atmosphere increased by 45 percent. The warming effect associated with carbon dioxide alone increased by 36 percent" (EPA). Thus, it is evident that policies and amendments are made by the governments to regulate carbon emissions and reduce global warming.

The everyday culture that has a high impact on the fast-moving modern world is Petroculture. This culture advantages mankind by the means of transportation which benefits the overall Nation with economic growth. The dependence on oil has developed into a modern culture that permeates every aspect of life on earth.

Every man-made object uses oil as a base ingredient. The PITCH project coordinator defines Petroculture as “a culture entirely dependent on the petroleum industry. Within a Petroculture, everything within society is in some way linked to oil: supply chains rely on fossil fuels, commodities are created from oil products, and much cultural philanthropy is funded by petroleum companies” (Chris Green,2024).

Petroculture is an emerging field that has multiple narratives and dimensions that deal with the day-to-day activity of people with petroleum. In the text, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* edited by Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman contains the research articles of twenty-one researchers showing their views on Petroculture in diverse. In this text, it is evident that oil has deepened the lives of people more than the first expectation. This text highlights the energy re-shaping influence on society, politics, and culture: “Its importance to shaping our lives is significant, reaching across the register of our experiences and moving from the concrete and material to the abstract and immaterial” (Szeman, 2017:9). The components for Petroculture can be witnessed in the ideas of

Randy Schroeder’s engagement with Allan Stoekl’s *Bataille’s Peak* – one of the only extended encounters between philosophy and oil – is intended to unsettle the assumptions informing the concept of “sustainability,” arguing that the rational instrumental philosophy that shapes sustainability is the self-same one that produced our environmental and energy crisis. (Szeman, 2017:9)

As humans have been wedded with fossil fuels, especially petroleum and its byproducts writers around the world fictionalized the reality and the genre petrofiction emerged. The term petrofiction was coined by Amitav Ghosh in his review of Abdul Rahman Mounif’s novel *Cities of Salt* and this paved the way for the field of Petroculture studies. Ghosh compares the oil trade of the modern world with the spice trade of the traditional world which has similarities socially, politically, and culturally. The petrofiction has a major impact on readers across the globe by bringing out the density of oil and its effects on Earth through its crucifixion.

Helon Habila, a Nigerian author revoked attention to the ecological issues Niger Delta in the novel *Oil on Water* published in the year 2010. Chronologically, his works bring the problems of post-independence Nigeria. He depicts the nightmarish consequences of oil spills, gas flaring, and the destruction of ecosystems employing the symbols of contaminated rivers, desiccated landscapes, and

wildlife perishing due to oil company practices. Habila portrays environmental degradation as a central force shaping the lives of the characters. He raises the eco-consciousness in the novel and compels individuals to confront the human cost of environmental greed and the importance of living in harmony with nature.

Oil on Water published in 2010 by Helon Habila portrays the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. The story deals with two journalists, Rufus and Zaq in the delta on a mission to find the kidnapped white woman Isabelle who becomes a pawn in the bloody conflict between the oil companies and the Niger Delta people. They navigate through the treacherous landscape of polluted rivers, militant activity, and government oppression, and encounter the harsh realities of environmental devastation and the destroyed livelihood of Nigerians.

Into the understanding of the text, Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture the components are to be Oil as a shaping force, material and symbolic impact, critique of power dynamics, Cultural formations, and Beyond resource extraction. The theory of Petroculture examines the complex relationship between oil, politics, and culture. The Petrofiction *Oil on Water* with the first-person narrative focuses on the two sides of oil. Habila gains the attention of eco-consciousness in the narrative style of beginning the novel with the style of media res. By employing this element in the novel Habila portrays the seriousness of the issue in the Niger Delta.

Petroculture argues that oil is not just a resource; it fundamentally shapes societies, economies, and even cultural identities. It influences everything from government policies to social norms and artistic expressions. In this regard, the novel presents oil as a shaping force on Irikefe island. It serves as a symbolic setting that represents the impact of the oil industry on local communities and the environment in the Niger Delta region. The island's portrayal in the novel reflects the harsh realities faced by the inhabitants as they grapple with the consequences of oil exploration and exploitation.

Oil on Water by Helon Habila portrays oil as a powerful shaping force that impacts both the environment and the lives of the people in the Niger Delta region. Oil is shown to be a catalyst for conflict and corruption, fuelling tensions between local communities, oil companies, and the government. The quest for control over oil resources leads to violence, human rights abuses, and a sense of powerlessness among marginalized communities. Through the characters' experiences and interactions, the novel

explores the complexities of the oil industry and its far-reaching consequences on society. It sheds light on the struggles of those caught in the web of greed and exploitation, emphasizing the need for environmental justice and accountability.

In *Oil on Water*, oil emerges as a central force that shapes the narrative, driving the plot and revealing the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and political issues in the context of oil exploitation. “Even thinking of shutting down their operations because the cost was becoming higher than they could bear, and this possibility was already causing tension in the oil market, with prices expected to rise in response” (Habla 106).

The water bodies are filled with images of death, waste, and permanence. One of the central characteristics of these toxic spaces is death. The novel emphasizes the overwhelming presence of death that oil extraction spills see. “The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter” (Habla 9). By focusing on the stench, decay, and shrinkage of the bodies of afflicted water, Habla highlights how oil extraction consumes violently.

The other important feature of these toxic spaces is permanence. The novel shows how a previously prosperous body of water became a permanent aquatic cemetery, as suggested by the disturbing image of the Niger Delta trapped under, “thousands of gallons of oil floating on the water, the weight of the oil-tight like a hangman’s noose around the neck of whatever life-form lay underneath” (Habla 180). This narrative stresses the temporal scope of toxicity as conveyed by the oppressive viscosity of the oil that coagulates and tightens the water, by exploiting the Niger Delta’s natural resources by disrupting the balance.

The dual nature of death and permanence in these toxic spaces creates a general environmental contempt, as seen through the waste metaphor. In this context, the novel describes how toxicity permeates and spreads into the surrounding water tributaries, as mediated by Zaq's encounter with contaminated water in a community well in the village of Delta when he looked through the well and there were dead and decomposing human bodies mixed with the smell of oil. Habla conveys the ecological crisis of wasting water by scenting contaminated water spoilage and stinks, resulting in the inability of communities to use clean water for their daily activities. By portraying these catastrophic ecological effects, Habla shows how oil exploration can turn an entire landscape into a wasteland and severely

destroy nature-based livelihoods and spaces for all generations. As a result, proximity to this wasted water can lead to illness and weakness in the human body.

The authority and power dynamics in the novel are portrayed by the characters like the Major, the commander Military who stands on the side of the government and therefore the oil companies think that people like professors who call themselves freedom fighters, and rebels are terrorists and kidnappers. These words sound hypocritical as they are inconsistent with the Major's violent behavior, especially when he affirms that "most times it's easier to shoot them than to capture them" (Habla 156).

In the shade of Petroculture, the novel *Oil on Water* also deals with cultural formations, extracting natural resources beyond the limitations. The rising percentage of oil spillages and gas flares must be taken into consideration as there is an adverse effect on both nature and humans. The gas flares from the industry cause major respiratory diseases in the people in the residential areas near the locality. There must be a well-planned infrastructure and ensure proper and efficient operating systems inside the industry. The problem arises with modernization and industrialization which eliminated all manual traditional methods of production just to meet the smooth flow of supply and demand.

Works Cited:

Environment, U. N. "Ogoniland's Oil History." UNEP - UN Environment Programme, 21 Sept. 2017, www.unep.org/topics/disasters-and-conflicts/country-presence/nigeria/ogonilands-oil-history.

Green, Chris. "Petrocultures: Unraveling Oil's Deep Influence on Our Culture and Heritage." European Heritage Tribune, 6 Mar. 2024, heritagetribune.eu/europe/petrocultures-unraveling-oils-deep-influence-on-our-culture-and-heritage/. Accessed 10 Mar. 2024.

Helon Habla. *Oil on Water*. Penguin UK, 5 Aug. 2010.

Pirzadeh, Saba. "Neoliberal Extraction and Aquatic Resistance in Helon Habla's *Oil on Water*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1886975>.

US EPA. "Climate Change Indicators: Greenhouse Gases." US EPA, 22 Feb. 2017, www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/greenhouse-gases.

Wilson, Sheena, et al. *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.