

Slow Violence and Sociocultural Degeneration in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

With the unprecedented technological advancements and energy consumption taking place at the present times, it has become fundamental to address the repercussions of environmental degradation. The role of literature in raising environmental awareness is crucial. Therefore, the present paper aims to investigate Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* using the concept of Slow Violence introduced by Rob Nixon in his 2011 book titled *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Slow Violence refers to the type of violence that is gradual and camouflaged. Due to its gradual nature, slow violence is often overlooked and unaddressed despite the fact that its repercussions often tantamount to direct and instant forms of violence. The novel, which is set in the environmentally devastated Niger Delta, follows journalist Rufus' journey along the delta where he witnesses the plight of the local communities. This paper investigates the effect of oil extraction on the sociocultural degeneration of the local community, arguing that the slow violence of oil extraction surpasses the obvious consequences of poverty and diseases, going as far as disintegrating the local communities social and cultural unity. The paper focuses on three main manifestations of slow violence, which are territorial theft, devastation of aquatic bodies, and moral decay. Thus, the main argument this paper puts forth is that the slow violence caused by the oil mining activities does not only manifest itself as environmental degradation but also as sociocultural identity degeneration of the Niger Delta population.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Niger Delta; Rob Nixon; Sociocultural Degeneration; Slow Violence

المخلص:

مع التطورات التكنولوجية واستهلاك الطاقة غير المسبوق في العصر الحديث، أصبح الالتفات لتداعيات التدهور البيئي أمراً ضرورياً، ولذا فإن الأدب له دور مهم وفعال في زيادة الوعي البيئي. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى دراسة رواية "زيت على ماء" لهيلون هابيل من خلال نظرية العنف البطيء لروب نيكسون. العنف البطيء هو عنف تدريجي ومستتر، ولذلك فهو في أكثر الأحيان لا يتم الالتفات إليه أو معالجته على الرغم من أنه لا يقل خطورةً عن العنف المباشر. تدور أحداث الرواية حول رحلة صحفي يدعى روفوس في دلتا النيجر حيث يرى الدمار البيئي ومعاناة أفراد المجتمع، وتسلط الدراسة الضوء على تأثيرات استخراج البترول وما أدت إليه من تدهور مجتمعي وثقافي للسكان المحليين، حيث وجد أن العنف البطيء الناجم عن استخراج البترول لا يؤدي فقط إلى الفقر والمرض، وإنما قد يؤدي أيضاً إلى تفكك الوحدة الثقافية والمجتمعية التي تربط بين أفراد المجتمع، وتركز الباحثة على ثلاثة مظاهر للعنف البطيء وهم نهب الأراضي وتدمير البيئة المائية والتدهور الأخلاقي، لذا فإن نقطة الجدل الرئيسية في هذا البحث هو أن العنف البطيء الناتج عن استخراج البترول لا ينعكس فقط في التدهور البيئي ولكنه أيضاً يظهر في تآكل الهوية الثقافية والمجتمعية لشعب دلتا النيجر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد البيئي؛ دلتا النيجر؛ العنف البطيء؛ روب نيكسون؛ التفكك الثقافي والمجتمعي

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context of the Study

In an age marked by environmental degradation and unrationalized resource extraction, the focus on environment-oriented literature is of utmost importance. As the renowned American Environmental Historian Donald Worster asserts: “Environmental issues are becoming *the* defining issues of the twenty-first century. War and poverty were the defining issues of the twentieth century” (Worster & Figueiredo 17). This urgency for foregrounding environmental texts brought along the emergence of a new genre in fiction known as Petrofiction. The term Petrofiction was coined by renowned Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, and refers to the interplay between literature and oil. As Canadian cultural theorist Imre Szeman points out, literary research would reap more interesting observations “if we frame cultural and intellectual periods and the literatures they encompass not in terms of movements (e.g. modernism), nations (british modernism) or centuries (eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth), but in relation to the dominant forms of energy” (Szeman 323). Therefore, investigating the impact of the various forms of energy on the environment is very relevant to the present era, which LeMenager labels as “petromodernity” (60).

Among the novelists who explore the genre of petrofiction and the repercussions of resource extraction on the indigenous population is the Nigerian writer Helon Habila. *Oil on Water* (2010) tells the story of a journalist named Rufus who embarks on a journey with senior journalist Zaq to find the kidnapped wife of a British oil executive. Along his journey through the Niger Delta, he not only witnesses the destruction and debris that the oil industry inflicts on the environment, but he recognizes the several other sufferings and traumas that the inhabitants of the land had to endure over the years. Through his novel, Habila exposes

the fact that the oil business has repercussions that go further beyond the obvious environmental deterioration.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The present paper aims to trace Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence in Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water*, with focus on the effect of environmental degradation on the sociocultural identity of the population. It aims to prove that this novel is an example of a Petrofiction that reveals the way through which the oil activities in the region not only bring about ecological as well as health hazards, but also threatens the sociocultural identity of the population. By analyzing *Oil on Water*, the paper highlights the various manifestations of slow violence and their connection to the population's identity. In addition, this research underscores the importance of paying attention to slowly unfolding forms of violence, which tantamount to forms of instant violence.

1.3 Research questions and arguments

This paper attempts to answer the following research questions: how is slow violence manifested in the work? How does slow violence of environmental degradation lead to the disintegration of the population's sociocultural identity? Furthermore, the present research argues that the repercussions of slow violence are tantamount to that of instant violence. It will also argue that the Niger Delta is not only under the threat of environment degradation, but is also threatened by the disintegration of the sociocultural identity which unites the region and grants it its sense of wholeness. Identity is a concept that has long been scrutinized and studied by scholars in various fields such as philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, to name a few. It is often associated with abstract notions like tradition, religion and values. However, a number of scholars attempt to view identity from a different stance. For instance, Eli Hirsch puts forth the idea of "bodily identity" (181), arguing that identity could be associated with concrete notions rather than abstract ones. Therefore, identity can be linked to other non-abstract entities such as place. This paper argues that the loss of identity does not only emerge from direct forms of colonialism which lead to the elimination of traditions and culture, but it can also result from the aftermath of resource extraction by foreign hands on the land of the affected population.

1.4 Rationale

The importance of this research primarily rests on the urgent necessity to address environmental issues. One way to do so is to refocus our study of literature on texts in which ecology plays a dominant role: In his book *Practical Ecocriticism*, Glen A. Love stresses the importance of evaluating literary texts in a nature-centered manner rather than a human-centered one: “My benchmark is ecological relevance. In a real world of increasing ecological crisis and political decision making, to exclude nature except for its cultural determination or linguistic construction is also to accept the continuing degradation of a natural world that is most in need of active human recognition and engagement” (8). Love agrees with the renowned scholar William Rueckert’s opinion that it is extremely important for researchers to foreground “the principle of relevance” in literary studies, asserting that “ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we live in” (107). Therefore, the researcher believes that it is essential to give environmental studies the required attention since it is considered a highly pressing issue. In addition, it is crucial to shed light on forms of violence which are camouflaged and take time to unfold, since they often lead to catastrophic repercussions. Therefore, the study is considered a counterargument to the misconception that violence is an eruptive notion, revealing the other inherent and slowly unravelling forms of violence which are often normalized.

Habila’s novel is chosen for this study due to the fact that it comprehensively addresses the oil conflict with its various dimensions. Habila offers a wide array of perspectives and gives voice to the different viewpoints and parties of the Niger Delta conflict. In addition, the novel’s structure greatly resembles a reportage since Rufus, the protagonist, is a journalist and was on a mission to investigate the case of the kidnapped wife of a foreign oil executive. Therefore, the novel puts forth factual information presented in a fictitious framework. According to a study conducted by P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp (2013), readers tend to empathise more with a cause if it is presented in a fictitious framework rather than a factual one. In presenting a pressing and serious issue like the oil extraction effects on the Niger Delta population and environment, Habila performs an act of writer-activism. He raises awareness of slow violence which would have otherwise gone unnoticed because of its limited visibility.

1.5 Theoretical framework

In order to examine *Oil on Water* with focus on Nixon's concept of slow violence, it would be appropriate to trace the origin of ecocriticism as it is the theory from which slow violence stems. Ecocriticism emerged during the 1990s as an initiative in literary studies, specifically in American and English literature. Its emergence is considered a reaction to the destructive behavior towards nature during the era of technological advancements in the mid 20th century. At that time, issues related to the environment started to move to the foreground and proved to be of considerable importance. Consequently, ecocriticism gained popularity after it had become clear that environmental degradation directly affects humans, and therefore, it was crucial to reconsider human behavior towards the environment.

Ecocriticism witnessed two major waves of development through which the major aspects of ecocriticism were crystalised. In his book entitled *The Future of Ecocriticism*, Lawrence Buell clearly distinguishes between these two stages of development. In the first wave, which lasted through the 1990s, the environment "effectively meant natural environment" (21). In other words, the main focus was on the environment in its pristine form rather than urban spaces. The primary focus of this wave of ecocriticism was to reflect on the beauty of nature and lament its degradation. Furthermore, there was a clear dividing line between nature and culture, putting forth the concept of nature-culture dualism.

However, in the second wave of ecocriticism, which was initiated in the beginning of the 21st century, nature and culture became intertwined. As Buell states: "Natural and built environments, revisionists point out, are long since all mixed up; the landscape of the American "West" is increasingly the landscape of metropolitan sprawl rather than the outback of Rocky Mountain "wilderness"; the two spheres are as intertwined" (22). Here, Buell points out that the line dividing between the natural and the urban has been blurred. Therefore, this wave is characterized by its focus on urban landscapes. Moreover, instead of focusing on nature's beauty, the second wave of ecocriticism focuses on environmental hazards. Its main objective is to shed light on social concerns, highlighting the idea that ecology shapes social ideologies and beliefs. The second wave believes in the idea that economic, social, cultural and political issues all intersect with ecocriticism. Therefore, it reinforces the fact that nature and culture are intertwined. As Buell states, "Literature-

and-environment studies must develop a “social ecocriticism” that takes urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as “natural” landscapes.” (22). Therefore, Buell argues that the development of ecocriticism proves that, in the modern world, it has become impossible to divide between nature and culture. The environment is not necessarily the natural environment, but it also encompasses built environments. Therefore, ecocriticism studies the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds, and observes how both parties influence each other.

Eco-critics are generally defined as “scholar-activists” (Newman 2), who do not limit themselves to academia but exceed its borders to reach out to a broader audience and make tangible changes in the way societies view the environment. In an interview conducted in 1997, Jonathan Bate, a leading British scholar and critic, asserted that:

If ecocriticism is to lead to a serious rethinking of the relations between humankind and the environment, it has got to operate within the language of intellectual enquiry as well as the practical getting your welly boots on .. All revolutions need an intellectual arm as well as the people out there on the ground, taking risks. (Qtd in Newman 3)

In other words, Ecocriticism has a greater aim which is to cause a shift in the way humans view and act towards nature. It is “a movement based in university literature departments, but one that is ambitious to reach beyond them, in order to accomplish a more serious and important goal: transformation of human relations with nature” (Newman 3). According to Bate, the environmental crisis is a problem of ideology. In other words, problematic ideas such as anthropocentrism, passivity of nature, and the limitless development using natural resources, to name a few, are all sources of the crisis. Therefore, most eco-critics view themselves as responsible for raising awareness. They hold the mission of changing the thoughts of the society towards nature, which in turn, results in a change of behavior.

Slow Violence

The emergence of the concept of slow violence altered the understanding of environmental deterioration. In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the poor* (2011), the renowned eco-theorist Rob Nixon coined the term slow violence which refers to the type of violence that is not immediate or noticeable, but rather long-termed violence. It is the type of violence that unravels slowly and gradually over

the long run. As Nixon explains, “violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (2). In other words, instant violence, like wars, is inevitably regarded as active due to its sudden and explosive nature. On the contrary, the nature of slow violence which “disperses over time” (2) makes it appear as unremarkable and is often mistakenly regarded as routine to the extent that it becomes almost impossible to trace the violence back to its actors.

Nixon states that ecological degradation could be viewed as an example of slow violence. The effects of activities which cause ecological degradation, like resource extraction, only become visible on the long run, when significant damage is caused. Therefore, this incremental nature of slow violence makes it difficult to detect. Nixon argues that despite the fact that slow violence unravels over a long period of time, its consequences are as severe and long-lasting as fast violence, like wars. However, slow violence is often overlooked and disregarded despite the fact that its outcome is no different than instant violence.

The concept of slow violence has its origins in the 1960s; however, back then it was not given that name. Famous Norwegian sociologist John Galtung, who is widely known as the father of peace studies, coined the term structural violence in his famous article “Violence, Peace and Peace Research” published in 1969. Galtung explains structural violence as the violence inflicted on a society through social inequalities due to racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination. He states that “there may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (171). Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence is seen as a development of Galtung’s concept of Structural Violence. According to Galtung, violence is not limited to physical violence, but could also encompass a type which is represented in the institutionalized deprivations that prevent individuals in the society from meeting their basic life needs. He asserts that “structural violence is silent, it does not show - it is essentially static” (Galtung 173). Nixon then further expanded Galtung’s structural violence into slow violence, which he defines as any slowly unfolding type of violence which is difficult to pinpoint. Nixon expands the notion of violence as to not be just limited to political type of violence, but any type of gradually unfolding form of violence, with focus on environmental catastrophes and their aftermath on the inhabitants of the devastated environment.

Nixon pinpoints two main overarching characteristics of slow violence. The first characteristic of slow violence is that it is often invisible. This invisibility emanates from two main reasons. The first reason is that slow violence unfolds very gradually, often lasting for a span longer than one individual's life expectancy. This makes it extremely difficult to trace back the origin of the damage since the whole process was not witnessed by one person. Slow violence is considered invisible because its repercussions build up over a long span of time and its effects are delayed, unlike other instantaneous forms of violence. Another reason for its invisibility is that the people affected are usually unaware that what they are enduring is a form of violence. In other words, the affected community get so accustomed to their unfavorable conditions that they no longer view it as a type of violence, but rather as their normal everyday life. As Nixon states, it is a type of violence "that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). They are unaware of how slow violence unfolds and how it can eventually cause massive damage.

The second characteristic of slow violence defined by Nixon is that it often affects the disempowered. This is due to two main reasons. The first is that companies and factories choose to site their activity in low income areas since that way they will receive the least resistance. Thus, the areas inhabited by poorer communities are often treated as environmental sacrifice zones. Since the disempowered do not have a voice and cannot reach out to the authorities, they remain stuck in their adverse circumstances. The second reason is that poorer communities do not have the means of combatting environmental hazards. They do not have the facilities of dealing with environmental deterioration and they also do not have the luxury of moving into a safer area. These reasons make them more prone to fall prey to slow violence.

Therefore, this research investigates the effect of environment degradation on the cultural identity of the land inhabitants. The identity ambivalence which the affected population suffers from could be labelled as a form of slow violence. It is not an instant and noticeable type of violence, but it is rather a form that unravels over the course of years and remains invisible to the public.

2. Analysis

Oil on Water vividly portrays the effects oil extraction in the Niger Delta on the population as well as the ecology. These effects, though indirectly, pave the way to the sociocultural degeneration of the Niger

Deltans. A deeper reading of the novel could reveal the layers of slow violence that emanate from the oil extraction activity in the region. Oil mining is not restricted to the toxified environment, but could reach out to affect the sociocultural identity of the inhabitants. This sociocultural degeneration is portrayed in three main manifestations, which are explored below.

2.1 Territorial Theft

One of the major manifestations of slow violence in *Oil on Water* is an idea named by Nixon as “displacement without moving” (19): a state in which environmental degradation “leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (19). In other words, the people are displaced without actually leaving their land due to the transformation of the environment into something different than what it had always been. This change does not happen overnight, but gradual alterations take place until the land completely transforms and becomes unrecognizable by its inhabitants. Thus, Habila attempts at “articulating the discourse of violent land loss to a deeper narrative of territorial theft.” (Nixon 132). In other words, territorial loss does not necessarily emanate from violent and instant actions of territorial occupation in the direct sense, but it could be a result of gradual territorial theft disguised as slow violence that could take years, decades or even centuries to unfold. As stated by Cyril I. Obri in his report entitled “The Changing Forms Of Identity Politics in Nigeria Under Economic Adjustments: The Case of the Oil Minorities Movement of the Niger Delta”:

In a region interspersed with swamps, creeks, rivers and lakes, and where land is scarce relative to population size, the acquisition of land by oil multinationals deepened the scarcity; and reduced the quality of land. Activities of the oil industry such as seismic shooting, canalisation, gas flaring, discharge of waste waters, and oil spills contributed to the degradation of the fragile delta environment. (27)

Therefore, the oil activities in the Niger Delta lead to the deterioration of the already scarce land. Territorial theft manifests itself in *Oil on Water* in the way the Niger Delta completely turns into a toxified environment described by Habila as a “stench of dead matter” (21). Through vivid and

detailed description of the devastated land, Habila reveals how the Niger Delta's topography completely changes into something closer to "the setting of a sci-fi movie" (65):

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. (66)

In the above quotation, Habila portrays how the oil pipelines has rendered the land unfamiliar to the extent that it looks as though "a deadly epidemic had swept through it" (20). Territorial theft is also evident in the fact that when Rufus came back from studying in the city, he could not recognize the village since "half the town burnt down" (135). This description strikingly contrasts with the description of the village before the oil industry broke out in the Niger Delta, about which Chief Ibiram nostalgically states that "once upon a time they lived in paradise. (...) They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy" (42). Those villagers, arguable, have been subject to territorial theft. Oil mining companies, though indirectly, have stolen the villagers' land as they know it. Since the environment transforms into something different than what it had always been, it is as though the inhabitants have been displaced without actually leaving.

Furthermore, the inhabitants experience territorial theft in the way their land becomes completely unfit for sustaining human life. As Nixon explains, territorial theft could also be defined as the state in which "one's place loses its life-sustaining features" (19). Rufus, the protagonist, listens to a radio broadcast when he learns that one of the village's inhabitants are living in a state of complete starvation due to the oil drenched environment which has killed fish, crops and livestock. Rufus states that: "they were speaking of the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water and how soon they might have to move to a place where the fishing was still fairly good" (16). Throughout the text, Habila heavily employs description of the petrol immersed environment such as "the evilsmelling, oil-fecund earth" (34) and "the oil-scorched earth" (175) which delivers the idea that the Niger Delta is an oil polluted environment that can no longer support life. The following quotation exemplifies how Habila constantly describes the Niger Delta as a toxified oil-infused land:

"Eager for a drink, I bent under the wet, mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well's blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot

depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. At the other end of the village a little river trickled toward the big river where we had left our boat. 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." (22)

The above passage clearly depicts how all aspects of the environment, such as the well, the grass and the river are drenched in oil. Personifying the land in the usage of the term suffocating and analogizing the grass with a smoker's hand reinforce the idea of slow violence: the land is not instantly destroyed by the oil mining activities, but it is slowly dying as though it were a sick smoker. Thus, the inhabitants inevitably abandon their land and move to cleaner areas. As Chief Ibiram lamentably states: "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" (186).

In addition to stationery displacement, forced displacement occurs when the foreign oil companies and Nigerian authorities seize the land. As Habila describes: "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" (75). The rest of the villagers were threatened to meet the same fate of Chief Malabo if they express any form of resistance. Therefore, "they sold. One by one" (75). Therefore, Habila blurs the lines that divide between direct and slow violence. It could be inferred that in the Niger Delta, displacement occurs both directly and indirectly. By forcing people to leave their land, the authorities directly evict the Nigerians from their land. On the other hand, by completely damaging the ecosystem and rendering it uninhabitable, the population are displaced without moving. Therefore, it could be argued that the outcome of forced displacement which uses direct violence is no different than the outcome of stationary displacement, an act of slow violence which Habila showcases. In both cases, the oppressed community feels a sense of detachment from their roots and struggles to accommodate in a land that they do not recognize. This reinforces the argument of the study; that the severity of slow violence is tantamount to that of direct violence.

Therefore, due to the slow violence of territorial theft, the population are

robbed of a part of their identity. As Habila reveals throughout the novel, the Niger Deltans are culturally, social and spiritually tied to the land. Chief Malabo, a character in the novel, points out that “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” (62). Thus, the Niger Deltans ancestral home which constitutes their identity, witnessed their history and is home to their buried ancestors, is gradually being engulfed in oil and seized by oil companies along with the populations cultural and social identity. Habila delivers the idea that the characters do not see their land as merely a geographical location, but as a place that shapes their culture and identity. As phrased by Cheif Ibiram, the Niger Deltans have become “wanderers without a home” (64). Despite the fact that they might not have been directly evicted from the land, the environmental wreckage has led to a state of identity ambivalence since the land they inhabit does not resemble the land as they know it. Therefore, it could be argued that changing the topography of the land threatens the cultural identity of its inhabitants, which therefore could be labelled as a form of slow violence.

Thus, it could be deduced that the exploitation of the environment did not only lead to a devastated environment, but also a cultural trauma to the land’s inhabitants. This cultural trauma is not the product of a single spectacular event, but of several micro-incidents that built up over the years. This example of slow violence meets Nixon’s characteristics of it as both invisible and targeted towards the disempowered community.

2.2 Aquatic Pollution and the Eradication of Livelihood

Another manifestation of slow violence on the Niger Deltans is the complete devastation of the Aquatic bodies in the Niger Delta due to the oil mining activities. As previously mentioned, the Niger Delta’s topography mainly consists of aquatic bodies. Therefore, a large portion of the population of the Niger Delta are known to be fishermen. Many Niger Deltans use fishing as a source of subsistence for food and income. Therefore, the pollution of the river and other aquatic bodies of the Niger Delta not only causes the obvious effect of diseases and food scarcity, but it also robs the population of a major source of livelihood that is a staple in the Nigerian identity. As Rufus eyes the oil drenched river which he describes as “daunting and so foe-like” (222), he observes the disappearance of fishermen boats and the usual scenery which involves fish selling:

Where were the fishermen setting out or returning in their long narrow boats with their jute nets at their feet and their sturdy oars in their hands? And where were the women waiting to buy the fish fresh from the water, talking to each other and to the fishermen at the top of their voices, now bantering, now flirting, but always bargaining? (222)

As the river becomes useless for fishing, the population are confronted with the dilemma of not knowing what to do for a living, and therefore have no option but to flee. This is evident in the fisherman's request for Rufus to take his son away from the Niger Delta so he could find a future for himself:

He noget future here. Na good boy, very sharp. He go help you and your wife with any work, any work at all, and you too you go send am go school...But see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that. Na good boy. I swear, you go like am. Intelligent. Im fit learn trade, or driver. Anything! (36)

In the above extract, the fisherman sees no future for his son amid the ruined delta and begs Rufus and Zaq to get him out of the Delta or else he would end up with the militants. Therefore, it is evident that the oil industry not only causes ecological ruin, but also robs the Niger Delta population of their traditional occupation that is passed on from one generation to the other.

2.3 Moral Decay and Social Fabric Disintegration

Another manifestation of slow violence that leads to the disintegration of the sociocultural fabric of the Niger Deltans is the proliferation of crime and moral decay that is a direct outcome of the oil mining activities in the region. The oil activities in the Niger Delta leads to conflicts not only between the population and the foreign companies, but also among different groups within the population. As explained by Okechukwu Ibeanu in his paper titled *Exiles in their own Home*:

“In oil-producing areas, the wanton appropriation and abuse of the indigenous people's land by petro-business companies have led to widespread land and water pollution, squeezed peasants off the land,

and heightened land hunger among the people. The net result has been an unprecedented rise in violent conflicts among peasants in different villages and regions over border lands and fishing waters. In the oil-producing areas, monetary compensation paid by oil companies and government has also fueled violent conflicts as villagers contest the ownership of land on which crude oil is mined.” (88-89)

However, the rise in violence and crime in the Niger Delta came after various peaceful attempts were futile. As explained in “The capital, state and the production of differentiated social value in Nigeria” by Buhari Shehu Miapyen, ethnic groups of the Niger Delta did not always employ violent means of resistance. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, inhabitants of the Niger Delta used several peaceful means of resistance such as petitions writing, negotiations as well as sending delegations to meet with the state and the capitalist firms. However, these attempts were not very fruitful. Therefore, in the 1990s the form of resistance took a more violent twist after it had become clear that resource extraction practices were only increasing and pollution was only becoming worse.

Due to their thirst for money, foreign oil companies led to the splitting of the Niger Delta populations into federal soldiers and local militias, also known as the militants. The conflict between the federal soldiers and the militants is exemplified in the clash between two characters in the novel: Major, who is the leader of the federal soldiers, and the Professor, who leads the militants, both of whom could be viewed as victims of the oil companies’ greed. This division among the populations leads to the disintegration of the social fabric of the Niger Delta. The militants, who claim to fight for the environment, project their anger regarding the deteriorated environment and oil theft onto innocent villagers who they constantly accuse of being in collusion with the government and the oil companies:

The roar of their speedboats was deafening, the glare of their flashlights blinded our eyes and threw the women and children into panic and confusion. Some of the women and children started to jump into the shadow water, some threw themselves below the benches, but, above the cries and wails of women and even men, one voice rose and tried to maintain calm. (195)

The above quotation expresses the severity of the aggressive behavior of the militants on the mainstream population. Thus, due to the rise in violence and crime in the region, many youths find no other option but to join the militants as an attempt to resist the robbing of their land. For

example, John, Boma's husband, abandons his wife and joins the militants to fight for the land:

He had become very political, hanging out in backstreet barrooms with other unemployed youths to play cards and drink all day, always complaining about the government. He had been full of anger before he left, the kind of anger that often pushed one to blaspheme, or to rob a bank or to join the militants. 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 forest with the fighters, some of them had made millions from ransom money, but some of them were dead. (126)

As mentioned in the above extract, the unemployment of a big number of Niger Deltan youth leads to their moral decay. The condition of the members of the population deteriorates; many of them drink heavily, others fight with the militants, while others have died in the fighting. In addition, Rufus' father is another character who associates with destructive behavior. He was illegally hoarding petrol and was drinking and smoking heavily. He then was imprisoned after he caused an accident as he lit a cigarette close to his hoarded oil drums, killing a number of people and disfiguring his daughter's face. All these consequences emanate from the proliferation of oil mining activities. Therefore, Rufus family disintegrates. His father is imprisoned, his mother leaves to her village and his sister suffers from depression due to her disfigured face.

Rufus' reply to Mr. James Floode, the British oil executive, on his accusation of the Niger Deltans of corruption encapsulates the effect of slow violence on the population. Rufus states that the Niger Deltans "endure the worst conditions of any oil producing community on earth, the government knows it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry and tired" (136). Thus, it is evident that the rise in violence and crime is a repercussion of the slow violence of oil extraction activities in the region. The transformation of an entire generation of youth into militants and criminals did not happen overnight, but took place gradually as the Niger Delta environment deteriorates.

2.4 From Place to Space: Identity Loss as Reflected in the Setting

All the points discussed above lead to the transformation of the environment from place to space. The main distinction between place and

space lies in the idea that place is a social construct while space is a mathematical concept. In other words, place is “a relatively fixed, stable, and thus familiar or at least recognizable point,” while space is “mobile, dynamic, and unfamiliar” (Tally Jr. 18). Hence, place is a more intimate notion; a notion more tied with emotions, familiarity and memories; whereas space is more universal, impersonal and emotionally distant. In a definition of place and space introduced by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his book titled *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, he argues that that space turns into place as “we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6), since place is an “enclosed and humanized space” (54). Thus, for a space to be labelled as a place, it has to be associated with certain cultural and social aspects. In applying this concept to the text, it could be noticed how some places are represented as spaces. This shift results in an ambivalence of emotions inside the characters as well as the readers. Among the struggles that the characters face is living in places that behave as spaces and still demand the same emotional attachment. When the land’s topography changes so drastically that it loses its familiarity, it is no longer recognized as a place, but more as a space. The inhabitants no longer view it as social construct but more as a mere geographical location.

In *Oil on Water*, Habila describes the transformation of the environment from place-like characteristics to space-like ones. Habila juxtaposes two detailed descriptions of the land, one before the oil mining destruction and another one of the current devastated land. The land that was once described as “paradise” (Habila 71), transformed into something that resembles a sci-fi movie setting (65). It is again obvious how the description of the deformed land yields a feeling of detachment that pushes its inhabitants to abandon it, since they “saw our village change, right before our eyes. And that was why we decided to leave, ten families” (75). Describing the land as resembling a sci-fi movie setting is an illustration of the degree of unnaturality and the extend of transformation that the land witnessed. The setting of a sci-fi movie is normally marked by destruction, deformity and lack of life. Habila constantly describes the land as lifeless, pointing out that the environment feels “heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter” (21). This reinforces the apocalyptic aura of the setting and the loss of placeness. Furthermore, since, “place” is “space given meaning through personal, group, and cultural processes,” (Quoted in Easterlin 237), then it is clear how the Niger Delta lost its sense of place when the land became unfit for fishing or hunting, which are social and group processes. Habila describes the land as initially fit for fishing and planting, which are social activities

that forms a part of the inhabitants' identity. When the land became unfit for fishing or agriculture due to oil pollution, it again loses its sense of identity and placeness, and transforms into a space.

Habila attempts to put forth the struggle of identity loss that results from "placelessness". He addresses the struggle of the Niger Deltans to inhabit a land that no longer possesses the social and cultural characteristics that make it home.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, *Oil on Water* addresses the consequences of oil extraction on the population and their environment. These consequences unravel on the long run and despite the fact that they cause detrimental consequences such as starvation, proliferation of diseases and poverty, these effects are often overlooked due to their gradually emerging nature. Through putting forth the concept of slow violence, Nixon underscores the importance of understanding that some forms of violence take time to wreak their havoc. Thus, this research paper traces the manifestations of slow violence with focus on its repercussions on the sociocultural identity of the Niger Deltans.

To conclude, Helon Habila succeeds in breaking the representational challenges of slow violence and sheds lights on the various invisible forms of violence which oil mining activities inflict on the Niger Delta population. Through a profound analysis of the text, it can be argued that the Niger Delta is not only at risk of the obvious health and economic repercussions of living in a wrecked environment, but that they are also at risk of losing their identity and their social unity. Territorial theft, pollution of aquatic bodies as well as the proliferation of crime and moral decay of the community all lead to cultural and social disintegration that does not happen overnight, but built up over the course of years or even decades. Therefore, the text reveals the ways by which oil represents a curse rather than a blessing for the Niger Delta.

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