Oil Conflict and *Nationness* in the Niger Delta: A Review of Crude Realities in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

The discovery of oil in commercial quantity in the Niger Delta region in the 1950s was heralded with resounding joy. This was because of the anticipated resources which were expected to engender rapid human and infrastructural development of the region and Nigeria at large. Unfortunately, after over six decades of this discovery, the region remains perennially impoverished and underdeveloped amidst pervasive environmental degradation, displacement, and wanton dehumanization of the people. This unfortunate reality has continued to incite discontent as the people of this region relentlessly struggle for fairness and equity in the nation's scheme of things. Over the years, this struggle has assumed different currents, including kidnapping, illegal oil bunkering, peaceful and militant protests as well as pipeline blowouts and vandalism. These unfortunate realities have been variously expressed through literary creativities of many Nigerian writers, including Helon Habila. In *Oil on Water,* Habila paints a vivid picture of the individual and collective predicaments of these dispossessed people, as well as the conscious steps they have taken in order to retrieve their lost rights and entitlements from the Nigerian nation and her multinational oil company collaborators. Adopting HomiBhabha's *DissemiNation* strand of the postcolonial theoretical framework, this paper examines how Helon Habila has deployed the technicalities of voice, action, character, setting and imageries in order to appeal to our sensibilities on the unfortunate individual and collective dispossession of the people of this devastated region. This is with the aim of lending our voice to the numerous calls on the Nigerian nation and her multinational oil company collaborators to shun humiliation, intimidation,

brutality and annihilation of the people and consider dialogue and more humane alternatives in proffering an urgent development of the people and their region.

Key Words: Habila, Oil, Conflict, Nationness, *DissemiNation,* Niger Delta

I. Introduction

Prose fiction has continued to serve as a vehicle for the conveyance of information about everyday life experiences of mankind. These experiences include details about man's physical, psychological and environmental well-being in relation to his survival in his natural habitat. In Nigeria for instance, creative writers have relentlessly employed their creativities as instruments for dissemination of the peculiar challenges of the people of their nation with the hope that it would lead to the necessary reorientation for achieving the much desired change. Amongst these Nigerian writers are those whose works are preoccupied with convincing imageries of the unfortunate experiences of the people of the oil- rich Niger Delta Region. Such writers include Tanure Ojaide, Vincent Egbuson, Chimeka Garrick, Kaine Agary and Helon Habila to mention just a few. In their works, particularly *The Activist, Love my Planet. Tomorrow Died Yesterday, Yellow-Yellow* and *Oil on Water* respectively, these novelists engage issues of the unfortunate experiences of the people of the Niger Delta Region as their subject matter. This choice of subject matter is arguably incited by realities of everyday experiences of the dispossessed, impoverished, neglected and displaced people in this region. The question then is, where exactly is the location of the Niger Delta Region within the Nigerian geographical space?

Ibaba describes the Niger Delta region as a Nigerian space which "is located in the southern part of Nigeria, and has Atlantic Ocean as its southern boundary with Cameroon" (1). On his part, a former American Ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell describes the region as "the heartland of Nigeria's natural resource wealth" (vii). He further declares that the Niger Delta region is:

> A vast swamp similar to the Mississippi River Delta south of New Orleans or Vietnam's Mekong Delta. It is one of the largest wetlands in the world. It is Nigeria's richest mangrove Ecozone in Africa. It is also where Nigeria's oil comes from. The Delta covers nine states and is home to thirty-three million people dispersed among five to six thousand communities. Ijaws are the largest, numbering fourteen million. (63).

Additionally, Tekena Tamuno affirms that proceeds from oil exploration in the Niger Delta region "has sustained the rest of Nigeria" for many decades (10).

Implicit in the foregoing impressions is the idea of nature's generous endowment and the expected comfort and well-being of people from this region. But unfortunately, the region has remained physically and humanly devastated and underdeveloped. The people of the region have continued to suffer neglect, injustice and inequity in the distribution of proceeds from oil resources extracted from their region. Amidst the unbearable heat and air pollution occasioned by gas flaring, the many kilometers of crisscrossing pipeline network, their farm lands and fishing ponds are also polluted due to oil exploration activities of multi-national oil companies. It is for these reasons that Nnamdi and others declare that:

> The Niger Delta is at the heart of economic prosperity in Nigeria as much as it is a charged space of contention. The indigenes realize this but are unable to fathom the abject neglect and poverty they are subjected to, in which a repressive state apparatus is implicated. (65)

Thus, the poverty, neglect and inhabitable state of this richly endowed region has incited numerous attempts by the people to see if the government and concerned oil companies will come to then aid. The inhabitants of this region lack such basic amenities as electricity, pipe borne water and access roads. Hence, they intermittently take steps in order to attract both local and international attention to their predicaments. The height of the steps taken by these dispossessed people is hostage taking and kidnapping of oil company personnel, particularly expatriate stall of multinational oil companies and their family members. Commenting on the desperate steps taken by the attention seeking natives of this neglected and impoverished region from the early 1990s, Karl Maier notes that:

> The delta was literarily a cauldron of turmoil. Villagers had resorted to taking hostages, mainly oil company workers found in the delta, as their preferred means of vetting their anger at what they considered to be years of neglect and repression by the Nigerian state. But they did not stop there. Self-organized units made up mainly of unemployed young men launched dozens of guerilla actions, including the occupation of flow stations and the sabotage of pipelines run by whichever company was closest, Shell, Texaco, Chevron. Mobil, Agip (110-111).

But unfortunately, these efforts have continually attracted stiff resistance and mindless brutality against the people by tin Nigerian state and their multinational oil company collaborator. It is these issues of neglect with the resultant agitation for rights and entitlements by the people of the Niger Delta region of the Nigerian nation that Helon Habila sets out to portray in *Oil on Water*. Engaging the unique

narrative technique of investigative journalism, Habila takes us beyond the everyday flat newspaper headlines about topical issues in the Niger delta region and takes us into the creeks and humanity of the major actors on the two sides of the conflicting divide: the people of the Niger Delta on one side and the Nigerian government with their armed soldiers and collaborating multinational oil companies on the other. Using this uncommon investigative narrative technique, Habila takes us on a harrowing tour through the ecologically degraded creeks with vivid imageries of the affected people, their many predicaments and their devastated communities. Here, we encounter unemployed and militant youths with their abducted victims, deprived and hungry children, famished elders, dislocated people, deserted communities and much more. But, before we delve into the discussion and analysis of Habila's preoccupation in this engaging novel, we shall consider the theoretical framework adopted in this research as well as the implication of the terms in our title.

2. Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored within the critical framework of postcolonial studies. We have drawn specifically from the postcolonial discourses of Homi Bhabha. Post colonialism means different things in different disciplines and different social contexts. In literary studies however, postcolonial criticism implies the existence of colonial legacies of opposing relationships in any given text. These opposing relationships include but not limited to such dialectics as the colonizer versus the colonized, tin- ruler versus the ruled, the oppressor versus the oppressed, the weak versus the strong, the privileged versus the unprivileged, the rich versus the poor, the armed versus the unarmed vulnerable, the haves versus the haves not. In other words, postcolonial critical analysis evaluates or interprets a text in relation to its social context. It is for these multifaceted reasons that Ann Dobie describes postcolonial literary critical paradigm as having commonalities with other disciplines such as:

> Anthropology, Sociology, Marxism, Feminism, popular culture studies and other nonliterary disciplines that examine distinct groups of people in an attempt to explain how a culture is created, maintained and weakened (205).

In view of the deprivation, vulnerability, poverty and marginal position occupied by the people of the oil rich Niger delta region in the Nigerian scheme of things, postcolonial critical approach serves as an appropriate parameter for the evaluation of Habila's *Oil on Water*. However, our argument in this paper will be focused on HomiBhabha's postcolonial critical strand sparticularly DissemiNation. Homi Bhabha is an Indian-American postcolonial theorist. He is noted for his ideas and concepts on the many ways through which colonized people have resisted the colonizer from “the moment of colonization to the

present day" (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin, 2). In this vein, Homi Bhabha posits that even though colonialism may have ended in the distant past, its legacies still subsist in contemporary human communities. Amongst his terms for colonial resistance by oppressed people are mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence and dissemiNation. In *Location of Culture*, particularly in the eighth chapter entitled "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modem Nation", HomiBhbha describes the term *DissemiNation* as the evaluation of past and contemporary developments in the nation through fictional narratives. Here, he particularly mentions such unfortunate developments in contemporary Third World nations as:

> Scattering of the people, gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering the memories of underdevelopment... the nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin and turns that loss in the language of metaphor... [it is the] complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of the people or the nation and make them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narratives" *{Location of Culture,* 200-201).

Taking this theory further, Bhabha maintains that the present oppressive issues in the nation are best documented, preserved and *dissemiNated* through the nation's narrative discourses. To this end, he declares in another essay entitled 'Narrating the Nation" that Nations, emerge from their narrative discourses because they encapsulate the nation's "political thought expressed in literary language" (3). He further opines that:

> To study the nation through its narrative does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also ... lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the fields of meanings and symbols associated with national life ... these approaches are valuable in drawing our attention to those easily obscured, but highly significant, recess of the national culture ... youth, the everyday nostalgia, new ethnicities, new social movements, the politics of difference (3).

Thus, it is the worrisome issues of "the uprooting of the communities and kin" as well as "the politics of difference" as enumerated by Bhabha in his theory of "DissemiNation", and as experienced in the Nigerian nation by the dispossessed, displaced and neglected people of the Niger Delta region as portrayed in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* that we seek to highlight in this paper. This is with the aim

of bringing to the fore, the poverty and marginalization of these people which now incite hostage taking, violence, and many other forms of restiveness and criminality m the oil rich Niger Delta region as dramatized in Helon Habila'st *Oil on Water*. At this point, it is imperative to consider the implication of major terms in our topic, particularly as they operate within the terrain of this study.

2.1 Conceptual
Review Oil and Conflict:

"OIL" implies the crude black substance which is extracted from under both land and sea in the Niger delta region of Nigeria. It is also known as *Black gold* in local parlance due to the multiplicity of the usage of its refined versions. By-product of this substance includes gas, fuel, diesel, kerosene and many more. This substance which is extracted in large quantity from the Niger delta region is in turn sold both locally and internationally and attracts lots of resources for the Nigerian nation. While the Natives from this region believe that they reserve the right to enjoy and control oil resources tapped from their domain, others, particularly the Nigerian state insist that the oil, irrespective of where it is deposited in the nation is a national wealth and should be shared. It is this variance in the ownership and control of this nature's endowment that has culminated in prolonged conflict between the indigenous people of the Niger Delta region on one side and the Nigerian state on the other.

Conflict: Though there are various definitions of conflict, the Glossary of Human Psychology describes conflict as that which occurs:

> Anytime you have opposing, incompatible actions, objectives or ideas. Conflicts can be between two person (an internal conflict). Conflicts are problematic and must be addressed in order to have peace, productivity and harmony (www.allevdog.com).

Implicit in this is the fact that the embers of the conflict in the Niger delta are fanned by the failure of stakeholders in the Nigerian scheme of things to address the grievances of the natives of the region. These people have continued to suffer loss of farmlands and fishing rivers due to environmental devastation, neglect, poverty and lack of basic amenities, including decent homes, education, electricity, and infrastructural development. These reasons have led their youths to restiveness including oil theft, illegal bunkering, terrorism and hostage taking. They also engage in unending frustration of concerned government institutions and multinational oil companies responsible for their woes. As rightly captured in the above citation, it is the loss of peace, harmony and means of livelihood in the Niger delta region and the people's struggle to control their natural resource

as well as restore their primordial serenity that Helon Habila sets out to dramatize in *Oil on Water*.

II. NATIONNESS

The term *Nationness* is derived from the noun Nation. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined Community of people who care for one another irrespective of distance, race, ethnicity, or gender" (6). Thus, just as the term "Good (ness)" describes the state of an object or a person, the term Nation (ness) literarily describes the "state" or "condition" of the nation. In the Nigerian context which Helon Habila writes about in *Oil on Water*, the nation is in a condition of dialectical juxtapositions in the ways different individuals and groups exist in the same nation. In the Nigerian nation which forms the setting of *Oil on Water*, while some people, including foreigners occupy privileged positions of comfort, control and management of the nation's oil resources, others are excluded from the management and gains from oil resources extracted from their native home lands. It is for these dialectical reasons of existence of people in the same nation that Anyanwu defines the concept of nationness as:

> The experiential quality of a nation. It is the quality of its conceived sense of identity as a group of people, an ethnic group or a region, it is within this qualitative, experiential dimension that we can gauge the nation's dynamic potential. *Nationness* means the condition of a nation or the quality of its conceived sense of identity as a group of people When it comes to the distribution of the nation's wealth, and opportunities, Individuals, groups and communities do not experience their nations on equal terms. It is these differences that foreground their ("Nationness", 105-106).

It is therefore within the foregoing implication of the concept of *nationness* that we shall locate the "experiential quality" of lives of the people of the Nigerian Niger delta region as portrayed in Helon Habila's *Oil on water.* We shall analyze the extent of the dispossession, displacement, and annihilation of the indigenous people of the Niger Delta region by the Nigerian government and their multinational oil company collaborators as dramatized in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water.*

Who is Helon Habila?

Born in November 1967, Helon Habila is a Nigerian Lecturer, journalist, novelist and poet. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Jos. His career path commenced as a Lecturer at the Federal Polytechnic, Bauchi. He moved from here to Lagos where he wrote for *Hints* Magazine and later joined Vanguard Newspaper, occupying the position of

literary editor. Still in search of the zenith of his writing career, Habila moved to England in 2002 and joined the University of East Anglia where he occupied the position of African writing Fellow. After three years sojourn in England, he moved to New York on the invitation of Chinua Achebe and pioneered as Achebe Fellow at Bard College. A year later, he moved to Virginia and joined Mason University, Fairfax where he currently resides with his wife and three children. Prominent amongst Habila's creativities are *Waiting for an Angel* (2006,) *Measuring Time: A Novel (*2007), *Dreams, Miracles, and Jazz: An Anthology of new African Fiction* (2007), *Oil on Water* (2010) and *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* (2011). These creativities have worn him honors and awards, including Caine Prize (2001), Commonwealth Writers' Prize: Africa Category (2003), Library of Virginia Literary Award for Fiction (2008) and many more.

3. Result and Discussion

In *Oil on Water,* Helon Habila brings to the fore, the experiences and actions of those on the two sides of the divide in the oil conflict in the Nigerian Niger Delta region. In this narrative, while the dispossessed and displaced natives are on one side, the government, represented by soldiers, Federal Patrol teams, and Multinational oil companies are on the other side of the divide. This dichotomy is in tandem with our adopted concept of *nationness.* In other words, there is an obvious juxtaposition or dialectics in the experiential quality of lives of the natives of the Niger Delta region, in comparison with that of the intimidating soldiers and privileged oil company executives. In this narrative which is rendered through the lens of a young investigative journalist, the reader is confronted with a convincing picture of the oppressive and intimidating dispositions of the soldiers and oil company executives in comparison with displacement, incarceration, and avoidable deaths of many natives of this region. The debilitating extent of suffering of these people is aptly captured through the voice of a foreigner Mr. Floode when he declares that, “These people endure the worst conditions of any oil producing community on earth” (97). Aside of their dehumanizing existential condition, they are constantly displaced, harassed and even killed by government institutions, particularly soldiers who are stationed in their communities to protect the interest of the federal government. This unfortunate dehumanizing situation has therefore incited the prevailing restiveness of youths from this region. Their struggle is not only a means of survival. It is also a tool for awareness creation on the urgent need for the emancipation of their people and restoration of their rights and entitlements in the distribution of the gains of oil resource.

As the narrative begins, we encounter two resilient journalists name Zaq and Rufus as they go into the deep waters of Irikefe Island in the Niger Delta region in search of a kidnapped white woman named Isabel Floode. Isabel is the wife of

James Floode who is a British Petroleum engineer. Soon after his wife's kidnap, James receives calls from over a dozen different militant groups who demand ransom for her release. He receives a letter from the kidnappers with Isabel's hair, demanding for five million Dollars ransom. He is doubtful that Isabel is alive. Thus, to ascertain her fate and confirm the exact militant group responsible for her kidnap, James Floode engages Zaqan alcoholic and ailing veteran journalist and the younger Rufus to undertake a search mission to the militants' camps in the creeks of the Niger Delta. According to them, their mission as journalists "Is to find out the truth even if it is buried deep in the earth" (137).As Zaq and Rufus embark on this uphill task, they are received and taken into Irikefe Island by an old man named Tamuno and his son named Michael who serve as their guide through this unfamiliar terrain. As they navigate through the ecologically devastated environment, they are confronted with harrowing imageries of displacements, deprivation, decay, harassment, dehumanization and death in the terrain. Thus, when posed with questions about the unusually deserted villages and communities on this island, the following ensued between the duo and the old man "Who lives here? The old man shrugged, ---Nobody. ---Dem left because of too much fighting (7). Aside of too much fighting as testified by Tamuno, Rufus gives us an insight into the inhabitable state of these deserted villages thus:

> The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it...Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform ... The houses began not too far away from the derelict platform. We went from one squat brick structure to the next, from compound to compound, but they were all empty... with windows on broken hinges, the roofs have big holes (7).

We are also given an insight to the indigenous people's forceful nayhasty manner of departure from their ancestral homesteads thus:

> Behind one of the houses we found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing, the maggots trafficking beneath the feathers. We covered our noses and moved on to the next compound, but it wasn't much different: cooking pots stood open and empty on cold hearths; next to them stood water pots filled with water on whose surface mosquito larvae thickly flourished... going from one deserted household to the other, taking pictures, hoping to meet perhaps one accidental straggler, one survivor, one voice to interview (7-8).

These predicaments transverse many settlements and communities in this abandoned dense mangrove terrain. Rufus confirms this when he declares:

> The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, and barrenness ... same sadness in the air. Instead of water, the community's well has a dead and decomposing human inside it." (7)

Additionally, the glaring ecological decay of both flora and fauna in this land leaves a bitter taste in the mouth of an observer:

> Insects rose from the surface in swamps to settle in a mobile cloud above us, biting our arms and faces and ears. In front of us we saw dead birds draped over the branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white- bellied between tree roots" (8).

As they sail deeper and deeper into the island, Rufus reiterates the nauseating decay of this oil rich region. He observes that:

> Strange objects will float past us: a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly up with black birds perching on it... once we saw a human arm severed at the elbow bobbing away from us, its fingers opening and closing" (34).

When the group eventually encounters some natives who are still domiciled in some parts of this devastated and deserted island, their situation is one of lack, pity, subjugation and uncertainty. This unfortunate situation is due to their stiff resistance of the government, oil men and selfish politicians who "offer to buy the whole village with money, more money than any of them had ever imagined"(39).This refusal to relocate for a fee, leads to their deprivation of basic amenities of life, harassment, incarceration and sometimes death. We feel their physical and psychological torture and pain through the voices and experiences of such characters as the old man Tamuno and his son Michael, Karibi, Chief Ibiram, Chief Malabo, Boma, Nature worshippers and the various militant groups who are represented by the activist Professor named Ani Wilson. As members of the imagined community of Nigeria, the nation impacts negatively on these characters and their kinsmen in this oil-rich geographical region.

The old man named Tamuno and his son Michael hail from the village in Irikefe Island described as "desolate, scarecrow settlement" (14). The ruthless treatment of the indigenes by government sponsored soldiers has turned this ancestral

settlement into a site described thus: "Irikefe is now mostly ashes and rubble, bombed by gun helicopters. Not a hut is left standing... a war zone" (157). Irrespective of the fact that their ancestral lands supply the oil which forms the bulk of the nation's wealth, Tamuno and Michael live in deprivation and abject poverty. The cacophony of their poverty is sounded by Rufus at their first encounter at Irikefe Island. He describes their tattered and malnourished appearances thus:

> The boy looked not more than ten years old. But he must have been older, his growth stunted by poor diet. His hair was reddish and sparse, his arms were bony like his father's. They were both dressed in the same shapeless and faded homespun shirts and trousers, their hands looked rough and callused from seawater, they smelled of fish and seemed as elemental as seaweed (5).

As a farmer and fisherman, Tamuno has lost his means of livelihood due to insecurity and oil pollution of his farmland and fishing river. His son Michael depicts a typical imagery of children bom in this crises torn region. He is like his playmates whom Rufus describes as "a group of urchins with shouts and curious stares" (9). These children are evidently deprived of education and good moral upbringing. For no fault of theirs, the endless hostilities between the militants and heavily armed soldiers have made their communities unconducive for learning and sane psychological growth. Thus, their bleak future is a source of worry to their parents. For instance, in this narrative, the old man Tamuno is afraid that his son Michael may join the militants if he grows up without education as their schools are perpetually closed due to insecurity. Thus, he seizes every opportunity to explore the possibility of sending him to the city where he would have the possibility of sending him to the city where he would have the privilege of acquiring decent education. In view of this he entreat;. Zaq and Rufus to take the boy with them to the city of Port Harcourt. He tells them about his concern for Michael's future:

> He no get 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 ... im fit read and write even though him school don close down (36).

Our sense of pity is evoked when Michael bursts into tears at the inkling of his father's failed attempt to make him receive decent education in the safer city. Rufus describes his sad emotion when he notes that at this news, "The boy began

to cry" (38). On the flip side of this unfortunate situation of poor Michael and his ilk are the children of indigenous traitors who have betrayed their people and sold their lands to greedy oil company executives and the soldiers for ephemeral enticements. Their children are not only educated in reputable schools in Nigeria, majority of them are educated abroad. In this vein Chief Ibiram tells us that these traitors are often caught "bragging that the oil companies had offered to send their kids to Europe and America to become engineers" (39). For this privilege, the village is divided and they have to live with the hazard of "flare burning over them, its flame long and coiled like a snake, whispering, winking and hissing" (39).

As the group arrive the first inhabited village they spend time with Tamuno's friend Karibi. Karibi is a victim of the repressive tendencies of the Nigerian government and their oil company collaborators. These enemies of the people are personified by heavily armed federal patrols and gun wielding soldiers. The old man paints a vivid picture of the dehumanization and injustice meted out to this dignified community leader. As they approach militants. He say he de innocent. Karibina important man for this village" (11). In addition to the soldiers' threat and harassment occasioned by an unfounded allegation against Karibi, Rufus tells us that Karibi remains calm. He "did not struggle or say a word" It is even more dehumanizing when he is forcefully taken away in a speed boat "sitting between two soldiers, his hands tied behind him". Karibi's son gives us an insight to what awaits his father as he is forcefully taken away thus "he'll be taken to Port Harcourt, where he'll be tried and found guilty of fraternizing with militants" (24). This scenario leaves the reader with a frightening imagination of the fate of the generality of the indigenous people of this region in the hands of the nation's justice system.

As they arrive the old man's village on the Island, they are hosted by his brother Chief Ibiram. In the course of their interaction, Chief Ibiram bemoans his people's predicaments occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation by the federal government and her oil company collaborators. He lists their predicaments to include the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of water, their displacements, disunity amongst the people and the systematic elimination of dissenting voices against greedy oil company executives. He tells Zaq that the disunity amongst his people is caused by differences in their perception and attitudes towards the oil companies and their collaborators. Like Obierika in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* Chief Ibiram recalls his people's former glory and the current loss of their inherited peace and serenity. Beginning his story in a folkloric style, Chief Ibiram recalls with nostalgia that:

> Once upon a time they lived in paradise. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children grow up before them,

> happy. The village was close knit. They were happily insulated from the rest of the world by their creeks and rivers and forests...one day Chief Malabo called the whole village to a meeting ... they have offered money. With the money they Malabo called the whole village to a meeting ... they have offered money. With the money they could relocate somewhere ... Chief Malabo had said no, on behalf of the whole village he had said no (39).

Chief Malabo's refusal to trade their ancestral home land leads to his unjust arrest. He is dehumanized, incarcerated and eventually killed. Chief Ibiram narrates the unfortunate fate of Chief Malabo who is also his uncle: "The next day, the soldiers came. Chief Malabo was arrested, his hands tied behind his back as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of supporting the militants and plotting against the federal government and threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers. The list was long (40).

Chief Malabo's prolonged incarceration results in his health deterioration. Chief Ibiram further tells us that "They went to see him one day, and were told he was dead. They were given his body, which was wrapped in a raffia mat and a white cloth, and told to take him away" (41).

Chief Malabo's exit exposes his people to intense pressure which leads to the submission of some of the villagers to the irresistible offer from the oil companies and their representatives. Villagers who remain resolute like Chief Malabo are forced to relocate from their ancestral heritage. Chief Ibiram bemoans this displacement of the indigenous people and the killing of their head chief thus:

> We decided to leave. Ten families. We didn't take their money. The money would be our curse on them, for taking our land, and for killing our chief. We left, we headed northwards, we've lived in five different places now, but always we've had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard the following week, oil companies moved in. they came with whole army, waving guns and looking like they meant business. (41).

The clan's relocation northwards is short-lived as they are soon seen relocating to Port Harcourt by night. Chief Ibiram gives the reason for this life saving relocation "we couldn't remain there anymore. My people are frightened, the violence gets closer everyday" (186).

Ironically, while the indigenous people of this region live in penury and lack of decent and stable accommodation, the expatriates and their local collaborators live in opulence and well secured dream houses. Rufus gives us an insight to the decency of Mr. Floode's accommodation when he visits him thus: "THE FLOODES' HOUSE was one of the many colonial-style buildings on the Port Harcourt waterfront, where most of the wealthy oil workers live"...I passed through two gates and about half a dozen security men talking to each other on radio" (94).Here lies the nationness between the indigenous people of the Niger Delta and the expatriate exploiters. Thus, while the natives are forced to either relocate from their homes or live with hazardous flares and relics of oil drilling activities, the expatriates live in unpolluted and well- furnished homes. Thus, Rufus reiterates the privilege enjoyed by Floode and his likes as he makes his way home "His home is neatly furnished with "split-unit air-conditioning, his alluring maid, his stubble, his double gated seafront house" (101-102).

Boma, Salomon, the activist professor Ani Wilson and all Niger Delta freedom fighters are other victims of oil exploration activities in their land. Boma is Rufus' sister. She is a victim of oil fire which left her with an ugly scared face. Unable to stand her deformed face, her husband John abandons her, hence she is now Rufus' responsibility. On his part, Salomon, is a victim of unemployment and dispossession. Unable to secure a decent job as a graduate, he condescends to the job of a driver to the British oil company executive Mr. Floode. He introduces his fiancee Koko to his boss who employs her as a domestic staff. But to his greatest chagrin, Mr. Floode impregnates Koko and proposes to marry her and take her to London at the end of his contract in Nigeria. Hence Salomon's collaboration with his friends Bassy and Jamabo to kidnap Mrs. Isabel Floode in order to punish Mr. James Floode. Salomon unfortunately dies in a bid to escape from his abductors.

The foregoing unbearable challenges of the indigenous people of the Niger Delta region have incited youth restiveness in the region. Deprived of the fair share of the gains of oil resources, the indigenous youths have taken to swamp hideouts from where they engage in pipeline blowouts and kidnapping of foreigners for ransom for their survival. Though perceived as rebels and terrorists by government institutions, the Professor and his fellow militants insist that their struggle is not only to take back what belongs to them but also to engender desired change in their region. Mr. Floode vindicates them from any wrong doing when he tells Rufus "Don't blame them for wanting to get some benefits out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into their rivers and wells and killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands" (97). Thus, the brutality of soldiers against them and their aggressive response have transformed the once peaceful and serene region into a war zone. As the violence intensifies in the region, the different restive groups merge in order to form more formidable common front in the resistance of the land grabbers. Henshaw gives reason for

their collaboration thus "we used to have a name, but no more. That is for children and idiots. We are people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand" (154). While the soldiers capture and shoot them at sight, they retaliate by occasional ambush of the soldiers. Rufus describes one of such clashes when the soldiers were on routine patrol;

> They hadn't known the militants were there, and they ran into an ambush-it was a massacre. They were all killed instantly. The militants had machine guns and grenade... The soldiers called for backup ... The helicopter came and started shooting at everything beneath it indiscriminately... people running and jumping into the water. It was awful. Awful. The water turned red. Blood, it was blood. Now, see everything is in ruin" (160).

Though the ailing Zaq dies before the accomplishment of his mission in the creeks, Rufus journey into the deep riverine forests and his encounter with the militants gives us an insight to their own side of the story. Through this encounter, Habila emphasizes the humanity and mission of the militants. For instance, the kidnaper who mistakenly takes an albino into hostage thinking he is a white man is punished for his mistake. Isabela is spared of rape or any physical abuse while in their camp. They also volunteer a boat to ferry Rufus and exiting captives; Rufus is given a bottle of drinking water to take along on his journey to Irikefe Island. The Professor declares their humanity thus "we are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people" (221). He threatens to frustrate the government and the oil companies until they are forced to pull out from their ancestral lands. He further commissions Rufus as a journalist to go out and write the truth, arming him with strong message to the government and her institutions "Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares and the oil on the water ... tell them how we are hounded daily in our own land ... tell them we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us (221) interestingly, the narrative ends on an optimistic note as the soldiers are seen pulling out of Irikefe Island while the villagers are seen rebuilding their huts and shrine.

CONCLUSION

In *Oil on Water,* Helon Habila engages the lens of an investigative journalist in order to portray the two sides of the oil conflict divide in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In this study, we have examined the voices and experiences of key players in the conflict as fictitiously dramatized in the narrative. Using HomiBhabha 'spostcolonial theoretical concept of *DissemiNation,* we have examined how Helon Habila has engaged the scholarship of the novel in order to "Disseminate" the peculiar pattern of experiences of the intimidated, harassed, disposed and displaced people of the Niger Delta region in the Nigerian nation.

In this clime, there is an obvious dialectics between, the suffering natives and concerned government institutions and their collaborating oil company executives represented by Mr. James Floode. In this hierarchy of socio-economic difference, the indigenous people of Irikefe Island are at the lower wrung of the divide. Habila's approach in *Oil on Water* exposes how the Nigerian nation negatively impacts on the environment and people of host communities in the nation's oil drilling business. As the voice of reason in his nation, Habila has fictitiously deployed characters, setting and believable imageries to prove that while the indigenous people in these communities are daily murdered and forcefully dislocated from their ancestral homes due to oil exploration activities, politicians and expatriate beneficiaries of oil wealth live in comfort and opulence in the city. By taking us deeper into the forest hideouts of the militants, Habila has also brought to the fore, the voices and humanity of those who have been tagged 'rebels' and 'terrorists' and the steps they take in order to express their discontent and retrieve their rights and entitlements in their nation's scheme of things. Thus, the pulling out of soldiers from Irikefe Island at the end of the narrative arguably implies Habila's endorsement of the need for the people of this devastated region to take their fate into their hands by shunning the complacent acceptance of injustice, dispossession and displacement meted out to them by government institutions and their Multinational oil company collaborators.

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