



## Research article

# The Capitalocene Versus Indigenous Eco-justice in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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## Abstract

Capitalistic disruptions on the face of the earth and the consequent climatic changes appear as serious global threats in the contemporary era caused by uncontrolled materialistic quests. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* depicts the saga of the perpetual predicament of the dehumanized Indigenous people in Nigeria, who inhabit a land of contaminated water, soil, air, and food induced by inconsiderate oil mining of the British oil companies which colonize and hegemonize both the human and the non-human world. Habila juxtaposes an unyielding decolonizing movement through the revolt of the Indigenous people against the oil extracting companies for eco-justice, which causes decay and death in the vulnerable Indigenous communities. The human-nature dichotomy triggered by capitalism translates into the massive destruction of the livelihood of the poor Indigenous people who rely on natural resources for survival and are not responsible for the detrimental environmental metamorphoses leading to their unemployment and displacements. Using the theoretical framework of eco-Marxism, this study examines the conflict between the commodification of nature and indigenous environmental justice in the Niger Delta. It investigates the politics of oil extraction and how it impacts the people of the region.

**Keywords:** Climatic changes, eco-justice, Indigenous people, oil mining, Niger Delta.



## Introduction

In the contemporary era, the environmentally degraded state of the Niger Delta illustrates that oil, a valuable natural resource that causes industrial and economic developments worldwide, brings about irreparable ecological damages and depletion of freshwater resources when it is treated as a means of earning more profit rather than just satisfying basic requirements. The Niger Delta region, the largest wetland in Africa and also one of the largest wetlands in the world, is considered the richest of Nigeria's biodiversity. This oil-producing region is predominantly rural and encompasses approximately thirteen percent of Nigeria's land, i.e., seventy thousand square kilometers, which is comparable with the size of the Republic of Ireland (Hand, 2021). The land where oil was discovered has not been treated as an element or gift of nature by the capitalists

**Article History:** Received: 15 December 2023. Revised: 19 February 2024. Accepted: 20 February 2024. Published: 24 February 2024

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**Citation:** Bose, T. (2024). The Capitalocene Versus Indigenous Eco-justice in Helon Habila *Oil on Water*. *Rupkatha Journal* 16:1. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.12>

but as a commodity or human property that can be “owned, used, bought, and sold” (O’Connor, 1998, p. 97).

In *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice*, D. Pepper (2003) comments on the utilitarian human stance which reduces natural elements to the status of mere objects or raw materials for various industrial purposes:

Indeed, the term ‘means of production’ includes nature’s materials, so use value is derived from a combination of them, and human labour. However, nature’s materials are seldom useful *until* they are converted to useful form by labour. But then, since Marxism regards humans as a part of nature, labour represents nothing more than nature working on *itself* to change its form. (p. 79)

The calamitous socio-ecological changes caused by rapid industrialization in the Niger Delta manifest that along with land and water, oil, a non-renewable natural resource is commodified, modified, and utilized. Gas flaring and oil spills poison freshwater resources, causing the local people of the Niger Delta to lose their access to freshwater and other natural resources for survival. Moreover, oil spills in the Niger Delta region acutely affect human health as a long-term effect (Ordinioha & Brisibe, 2013).

Anthropogenic destruction of the environment, specifically, freshwater resources, has become a core concern of twenty-first century environmentally conscious Nigerian authors. Nigerian poet and novelist Helon Habila’s novels frequently deal with the themes of military dictatorship, capitalism, pollution, eco-dystopia, isolation and weariness, unsuccessful love affairs, political corruption, oppression, viciousness, and death and are marked by freedom of expression, authentically mirroring postcolonial Nigeria. Habila’s 2010 realistic climate novel *Oil on Water* revolves around the oil pollution of the river water in the Niger Delta. The events of the novel mostly take place in August 2009. Habila chronicles the tale of violence and traumatic experiences of the Indigenous people who are caught in the tumultuous circumstances arising from the two warring groups – the government soldiers (military) and the group of affected local people of the Niger Delta known as “militants” in the novel. Furthermore, it deals with the theme of the uncontrolled exploitation of nature by the British oil companies and the acute misery of the underprivileged local people. The socio-ecologically appalling region depicted in *Oil on Water* resembles what Lawrence Buell (2001) terms as “toxic gothic,” showcasing the “gothicized environmental squalor” that often goes with distressing narratives of “contaminated communities” (pp. 42–43, 36). The paper underlines the bio-colonization (Kimball, 1996) of the oil companies that disrupt the non-human world and the lives of the Indigenous communities for whom the era of the Capitalocene seems utterly apocalyptic.

### **Conceptualizing Ecological Marxism and the Capitalocene**

Ecological Marxism investigates the dialectics of nature from a Marxist standpoint and encounters the concepts of conservation and sustainable development (Maity, 2020). In “Marx’s Ecology in the 21st Century,” Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster (2010) argue that “the ‘problem of nature’ is really a problem of capital, as natural cycles are turned into broken linear processes geared to private accumulation” (p. 143). Clark and Foster maintain that the contemporary ecological crises

arise from capitalist greed and the inclination towards earning a profit or privatization of property rather than protecting nature. According to Ecological Marxism, capitalist development has two key features – overproduction and over-consumption (Han, 2012). Overproduction denotes the capitalists' continuously escalating the scale of production and reproduction because of their acquisitive nature and aim to make more profits (Meng, 2021). Ecological Marxism reflects on the significant contribution of capitalism to environmental ruin:

...the drive for the endless accumulation of capital—and the state apparatuses that support that drive—leads to the undermining of the very processes that enable the reproduction of capital. Profits are privatised, while costs are socialised and at the same time offset onto the rest of nature. The regular workings of capital generate conditions within which social reproduction itself can become unsustainable and environmental degradation becomes rife. (Saed, 2019, p. 3)

Ecological Marxism reflects that capitalist globalization eventually led to a global ecological crisis. Ecological Marxists who hold capitalism's mode of production, that is the pursuit of profit expansion as responsible for the ecological crisis point out that it deteriorates the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat and between humankind and ecology (Wang, 2008). The current era of anthropogenic global climate breakdown – an offshoot of the world's economic attainments (Dobbins et al., 2015) has translated into an insufficiency of natural resources, especially, fresh water. Human-induced climate alteration and water scarcity may cause economic collapse and socio-political uproar, distressing the vulnerable poor who lack resources and are the primary victims of neoliberal "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2), "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Hence, human-induced slow violence refers to the slow-paced process of destruction of the environment happening on a massive scale worldwide.

Global climate change as a life-threatening aftereffect of the Anthropocene is one of the gravest calamities of the contemporary epoch, wherein the phenomenon may lead the climate system to surpass a tipping point. Derived from the Greek words *anthropo*, for "man," and *cene* for "new," the word "Anthropocene" was coined and made popular by the American biologist Eugene Stomer and the chemist and Nobelist Paul Crutzen in 2000. Pieter Vermeulen calls the Anthropocene a "misnomer and disclaimer" (p. 7), and possibly, this linguistic infelicity is inescapable since humankind inhabits what Crutzen (2016) terms "terra incognita" (p. 23), an earth that seems unknown.

Jason W. Moore (2016) propounded the concept, of the Capitalocene as an affront to Crutzen and Stoermer's Anthropocene to underscore the irretrievable human contamination of natural resources and the endangered state of the planet specifically because of unbridled capitalistic quests. In his introductory chapter of *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Moore (2016) maintains, "...the Capitalocene does not stand for capitalism as an economic and social system. It is not a radical inflection of Green Arithmetic. Rather, the Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (p. 6). Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018), in his article "Anthropocene Time," maintains,

Many argue about the politics of the name and propose, for instance, that the epoch be more properly called 'the Capitalocene' or 'econo-cene' so that a vague and undifferentiated humanity— 'anthropos'—is not held responsible for bringing about this time and that the blame is laid squarely at the door of a system: capitalism or the global economic system. (p. 6)

Chakrabarty holds the epoch called the Capitalocene as responsible for bringing about destructive changes in the environment and climate. In the era of capitalist industrialization and globalization, such concerns happen to be more pronounced, when the planet's fresh water resources are reducing very fast owing to two main reasons – overuse and pollution of water bodies.

### **Synopsis of Habila's *Oil on Water***

*Oil on Water* has a non-linear narrative that moves back and forth in time and place. The novel begins with an explosion in the barn with the oil drums and the destruction of many houses in the ensuing fire in the oil landscape of the Niger Delta. It records the adventures of a young journalist Rufus and an older veteran journalist Zaq, who are assigned to confirm whether Isabel, the kidnapped wife of the British oil executive James Floode, is still alive or dead. If she is found alive, then, the company will pay the ransom for Floode charged by the militant abductors. Zaq and Rufus undertake a journey on a boat on the waterscapes of the Niger Delta under the guidance of the old boatman and his son. They chase 'the perfect story,' i.e., the truth and the mystery of Isabel's kidnapping which will be found to be linked to the mechanism of neoliberal exploitation of the delta and the strong opposition of the victimized locals. Felicity Hand (2021) notes, "the search for Isabel Floode, the kidnapped British woman, becomes a sideshow for the real ecopolitical struggle into which Rufus and Zak find themselves embroiled" (p. 110).

According to Greg Garrard (2004), eco-philosophers critique the egotism of Anthropocentrism, occasionally using the Ancient Greek term 'hubris' for this terminal error of conceited self-righteousness and willful ill use of authority. In *Oil on Water* environmental decay is the consequence of this hubris. The novel shows that water pollution disrupts the coherent structures of the human world and endangers human existence in various forms – life-threatening diseases and untimely death, lack of livelihood, poverty, displacement, and disharmony. Zaq is diagnosed with haemorrhagic fever which is very dangerous and can kill a person quickly if it is not treated instantly, according to Dagogo-Mark, a doctor at the Major's (of the military) camp. The doctor explains that his fever is like dengue fever – a similar strain and nameless. The doctor updates Rufus, "I've come across it only two or three times before in this area. Bugs and the water, you know, and if that combination doesn't kill you, the violence does" (Habila, 2011, pp. 89-90). The doctor considers this place of continual flames and orange sky "a dead place, a place for dying" (Habila, 2011, p. 90). The alcoholic and sick Zaq philosophizes on everything he perceives there – "a bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil-polluted water, a gathering of rain clouds in the clear sky" (Habila, 2011, p. 5).

The doctor reflects on the changing socio-ecological scenarios with the discovery of oil since the day of his joining here as a doctor: "The villagers feasted for weeks... They'd dance, their faces raised up to that undying glow, singing their thanks and joy, their voices carrying for miles over

the water” (Habila, 2011, p. 91-92). Though the doctor warns the villagers about the impending dangers as a consequence of such “quenchless fire” (Habila, 2011, p. 92), the villagers do not pay attention to such warnings. After a year, their cattle start dying and the plants wither on their stalks. The doctor finds that the level of toxins in the drinking water is rapidly increasing when he tests samples of that water in his lab: “...in one year it had grown to almost twice the safe level” (Habila, 2011, p. 92). Nixon (2011) states,

Ours is an age of onrushing turbo-capitalism, wherein the present feels more abbreviated than it used to—at least for the world’s privileged classes who live surrounded by technological time-savers that often compound the sensation of not having enough time. Consequently, one of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice. (p. 8)

In *Oil on Water*, on behalf of the environment and the suffering villagers, the doctor confronts the oil workers and fights for environmental justice and justice for the dying villagers: “Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear, just like that” (Habila, 2011, p. 93). When humans start dying, he takes blood samples and sends the results to the government, NGOs, and international organizations so that the results are published wide enough to draw the government’s attention to this crisis.

Habila’s novel enunciates how the slow ecological destruction by the oil companies in the Niger Delta confirms the human-human conflict between the government of Nigeria and the oil-affected Indigenous people. Nixon (2011) maintains,

Nigeria’s dependence on oil is absolute: it constitutes 96 percent of Nigeria’s export revenue and generates 80 percent of government income. Thus, Nigerian oil (of which the United States buys 40 percent) has readily become a precondition of and a byword for militarization. The petro-state has given rise, moreover, to a society in which 85 percent of oil wealth goes to a mere 1 percent of the populace, almost none of whom belong to the micro-minorities who inhabit, ingest, and inhale the ecological devastation. (pp. 106-107)

In *Oil on Water*, it can be perceived that in this conflict, the government and the military try to defend the incomes and the apparatuses of oil production against the Indigenous eco-warriors who aim at redeeming both the human and the non-human world from the dictatorship of oil industries, often by devastating oil production and abducting foreigners for ransom. Maximilian Feldner (2018) argues that “recruited from the impoverished inhabitants of the Delta, their actions are both their only viable source of income and an outlet for their frustration and anger” (p. 521). But it also seems undeniable that even though the activists only try to stop the oil-induced damage to their land, water, and people, their violence spreads terror in the minds of common people.

### **Echoes of Capitalism and Eco-Justice in Habila’s *Oil on Water***

Frederick Buell’s 2012 pioneering essay “A Short History of Oil Cultures,” shows how the material values of oil gained a political-cultural status leading to the development of oil capitalism in modernist culture. Buell states that in the early twentieth century, various capacities of oil and oil-

induced progress were acknowledged and highly valued. Contrary to this, in the second half of the twentieth century, critics began to see the disastrous effects of oil in the forms of ecological disasters, geopolitical variability, and violence. Likewise, Jennifer Wenzel (2020) aptly puts it:

The contradictory outcomes of underdevelopment—wealth for some, poverty for others—are concentrated within this spectacular site. The literal and metaphorical substrate of wealth in a hydrocarbon-fueled global economy, oil generates local degradation, dispossession, and repression as it is unearthed and piped away for consumption elsewhere. (p. 84)

*Oil on Water* articulates the predicament of the affected inhabitants of the Niger Delta, who have comprehended the realism of the petro-magic when their suffering starts owing to some detrimental changes in the environment and the river water. Nixon (2011) maintains, “the oil encounter lends itself to populist fairy tales of sudden bounty that easily sour into volatile disillusionment, as people possessed by outsize dreams find themselves captive instead to outsize military regimes and the disenchantments of a ruined environment” (p. 72). In *Oil on Water*, the Indigenous people are disillusioned eventually and start revolting against this heedless ecological as well as human destruction.

*Oil on Water* poignantly depicts the disintegrated Delta communities in villages when Rufus and Zaq come across a village deserted by the villagers who escape from the tumultuous fight by fleeing their homes. The village appears barren as if “...a deadly epidemic had swept through it” (Habila, 2011, p. 8). Rufus and Zaq find the carcasses of ten chickens in a desolate house, and in another compound, they see abandoned cooking pots and water pots. They pass through a dense mangrove swamp where the water appears not as a source of life but as foul and sulfurous and full of biting insects. This underlines the slow but sure human violence inflicted on the water and the poor who are reliant on it as rightly pointed out by Nixon (2011):

In the global South, oil culture in particular typically brings few new jobs to the locals to replace old forms of communal subsistence jeopardized by fouled water, earth, and air. Multinational oil corporations, seeking a pliable workforce, prefer to import laborers from rival communities or distant lands rather than create jobs for communities most immediately affected by extraction operations. This practice, in turn, impedes labor unions and civic organizations from developing—organizations that could mesh the workplace with the priorities of neighboring communities, whose ostensible resource wealth has reduced them (from the perspective of fossil fuel authoritarians and their partners, the oil majors) to disposable people. (p. 71)

In *Oil on Water*, the impoverished people of the Niger Delta are heavily exploited by capitalists and fight for life amidst socio-ecological conflicts and adversities. Janine MacLeod (2017) observes,

Since the dramatic postwar expansion of the commercial petrochemicals industry only six or seven decades ago, everyday life across the globe has been inextricably permeated by substances derived from coal, oil, and gas... As rivers, aquifers, and oceans accumulate the long-lived by-products of fossil fuel dependence and capitalist social relations, the meanings and emotional resonances of water are likewise profoundly altered. (p. 264)

Habila recounts how the river water and the entire environment choke Rufus and Zaq with a heavy smell of deadly matter: "dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (p. 9).

The villages that Rufus and Zaq visit appear as facsimiles of each other with similar empty households, foul smell, barrenness, oil slick, and "an indefinable sadness in the air" like "a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return" (Habila, 2011, p. 9). The boatman keeps on sailing as on the "black, expressionless water there were no birds or fishes or other sea creatures" (Habila, p. 10), thus making them feel utterly lonely. Through all these images, Habila creates a concrete vision of an eco-apocalyptic world of polluted water bodies and changing climate in contemporary Nigeria: "We are heading toward a multipolar global order that will depend for its survival on belated—and therefore evermore desperate—responses to uncertain petroleum reserves and mounting climate change" (Nixon, 2011, p. 68). *Oil on Water* illuminates how poisoned water in a climatologically changing era transmutes the living world into a place for dying.

Rufus and Zaq are taken to a village where the old boatman Ibiram's brother, is the chief. Rufus imagines the boatman as talking to the chief about 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" (Habila, 2011, p. 17). Initially, the oil companies aided by politicians want to buy the whole village for drilling rights, where oil is found, and allure the villagers with the possibility of relocation and a rich life. But on behalf of the whole village, Chief Malado rejects the proposal of the oil companies to give their village up to them for oil drilling. Nixon (2011) comments,

Neoliberal assaults on inhabited environments have of course met with variable success ...Resistance may assume not just human forms but also arise from an unanticipated recalcitrance on the part of a targeted resource, which may prove harder to commodify and profitably remove or manage than corporate moguls foresaw. (pp. 20-21)

Habila, in *Oil on Water*, shows how initially human resistance appears as a more powerful obstacle in the way to the commodification of natural resources. But, manipulatively, the soldiers arrest and kill Chief Malado on the charge of supporting the militants, conspiring against the federal government, and threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers.

On the other hand, the idea of a place that can be perceived as one of the major concerns of this novel has always been of key concern to ecocritical studies – to redress the historic neglect of setting relative to plot, character, image, and symbol in literary works, and to address environmental concerns. Moreover, ecocriticism's attention to place reflects its recognition of the interconnectedness between human life/history and physical environments to which works of imagination bear witness (Glottfelty, 1996). *Oil on Water*, Chief Ibiram laments the loss of the previous heaven-like state of their village and the death of their head chief named Malado, Chief Ibiram's uncle. He reminisces their past happiness: "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" (Habila, 2011, p. 38). In utter grief, Ibiram also utters, "We are looking for a place where we can live in peace... we are mere wanderers without a home?" (Habila, 2011, p. 41).

*Oil on Water* pronounces a conspicuous mass migration of the Indigenous people in search of job opportunities from rural areas to a place not so far away from Port Harcourt, where people are not xenophobic: "many of the delta's oil minorities, exiled from their subsistence cultures by ruined land, by dead-fish waterways, by government attacks and by multiplying uncontrollable militant groups, have gravitated toward the city of Port Harcourt" (Nixon, 2011, p. 126). Nixon focuses on real-life evidence of the refugee crisis in the Niger Delta and states, "When refugees are severed from environments that have provided ancestral sustenance they find themselves stranded not just in place but in time as well. Their improvised lives in makeshift camps are lives of temporal impoverishment" (p. 162). Nixon (2011) argues,

Attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements—temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs. Such displacements smooth the way for amnesia, as places are rendered irretrievable to those who once inhabited them, places that ordinarily pass unmourned in the corporate media. (p. 7)

Habila depicts that the oil companies pollute grass, rivers, and creeks. Throughout the novel, the reader comes across villages and houses deserted – each village a replica of the other. Hence, searching for a place to call home is a dominant motif in *Oil on Water*.

Thus, *Oil on Water* illustrates how oil discovery is concomitant with the dispossession of the local people of the Niger Delta given that "the vast majority of the onshore reserves are located in the Delta, a region of tropical rainforest and deltaic agro-fishing communities comprising some of the highest population densities in Africa..." (Watts, 1999, p. 5). Moreover, the war between the government military and the militants appears incessant and results in the death of many people. Rufus comes across an uninhabited island named Agbuki Island: "The whole island was aflame" (Habila, 2011, p. 68) with some dead bodies there, "bloody, broken and twisted" (Habila, 2011, p. 71).

The novel also exposes the objectification and dehumanization of human beings along with water resources. Rufus asks the Major if the militants captured by Major and the soldiers are to be tried in court. Major proclaims: "There are no human rights for people (the local people) ... The best thing is to line them up and shoot them" (Habila, 2011, p. 97). Solomon Adedokun Edebor (2017) argues,

... the vibrant youths that should have served as future leaders are drawn to the theatre of war with the government-backed transnational companies, leading to their inhuman tortures and eventual extermination in the hands of angry military men who consider them expendable commodities, not worthy to lay claim to their rights as humans. (p. 47)

Furthermore, the narrative throws light on the degradation of the ecosystem and the morality of the local people. For instance, Rufus perceives a sea change in his father's character after he loses his job at the ABZ oil company. He leaves all his religious practices and indulges in illegal business, i.e., oil theft and bribing the policemen.

Also, the local people of the Niger Delta are often oppressed by the soldiers. For instance, a shopkeeper named Karibi is forcefully taken by two soldiers to Port Harcourt to be tried and



eventually found guilty of associating with the militants: "Communities like this had borne the brunt of the oil wars, caught between the militants and the military. The only way they could avoid being crushed out of existence was to pretend to be deaf and dumb and blind" (Habila, 2011, p. 33). At the Major's camp, Rufus asks Henshaw, a fellow prisoner and a local, if his group has any name to it. Henshaw replies, "No! We used to have a name, but no more. That is for children and idiots. We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand" (Habila, 2011, p. 149). This extract from the text stresses how oil pollution leads to both identity and existential crises induced by human-human dichotomy in the epoch of neoliberalism (Glotsfelty, 1996).

One of the key precepts of Eco-Marxism is social metabolism, i.e., human society communicates with nature creating a self-reproducing system. Marx's social metabolism denotes the shared requirement of man and nature, i.e., humankind needs nature to support survival; nature also wants human's nutritious surplus for existence. It is observed,

Marx avoided subordinating nature to society, or vice versa, allowing him to elude the pitfalls of both absolute idealism and mechanistic science. His metabolic analysis recognizes that humans and the rest of nature are in constant interaction, resulting in reciprocal influences, consequences, and dependencies. These processes emerge within a relational, thermodynamic whole, the universal metabolism of nature. (Foster and Clark 2020, p. 182)

Alterations associated with the capitalist system drastically impact the intrinsic rapport between nature and humankind (Glotsfelty, 1996) leading to an ecologically catastrophic world. The unchecked capitalist systems have resulted in what Marx terms "metabolic rift" which looms over the environmental grounds of human existence on earth. Karl Marx observes diverse sorts of metabolic rifts like climate change, energy crisis, and desertification to name a few.

In *Oil on Water*, besides various socio-ecological apocalypses that explicate this metabolic rift, interestingly, Habila juxtaposes a group of nature worshippers in Irikefe with the oil companies, who believe that the natural elements have the power to heal "oil-polluted waters" (Habila, 2011, p. 175). A girl named Gloria who is a nurse by profession, explains to Rufus the ritual of nature worship as she recapitulates a terrible war a long time ago that massively infects the river. After the war, this shrine was constructed. Gloria states, "The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. That was when priests from different shrines got together and decided to build this shrine by the river. The land needed to be cleansed of blood, and pollution" (Habila, 2011, pp. 129-130). Gloria's recapitulation shows how "the long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths or climate change—are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory" (Nixon, 2011, pp. 2-3). *Oil on Water* validates the indigenous belief that the rivers heal themselves and become pure again naturally.

On one hand, ecological Marxists "believe that the ecological crisis has replaced the economic crisis and is more likely to become the cause of capitalist disasters, even global disasters, because the ecological crisis has threatened the survival of human beings. Capitalism cannot find a way out for ecological crisis" (Li, 2021, pp. 213-214). In *Oil on Water*, capitalism wrecks the ecology without offering any cure; on the contrary, Gloria believes in the curative power of river water, and

how the worshipers have tried to keep Irikefe village “free from oil prospecting and other activities that contaminate the water and lead to greed and violence” (Habila, 2011, p. 130) of the oil companies and the conflict between the soldiers and the militants. Dawn Stevenson (2023) observes,

Indigenous peoples represent only 4% of the global population, yet they are guardians of more than 80% of the world’s biodiversity. Strong Indigenous land rights have been recognised as an important climate solution. Yet in many parts of the world, Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) do not have tenure of the forest land they live on, despite the fact that when they do, they are better able to conserve it. Support for sustainable livelihoods is also crucial to ensuring Indigenous peoples can fulfil the role of guardians and protectors. (para. 13)

The oil executive James Floode holds the local people responsible for the poverty and disorder in their country and it is as if, they waste their potential through ferocity, dishonesty, and sabotage. At this juncture, Rufus calls James’s attention to the suffering of the people of a place named Junction and also defends their rebellion:

These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn’t have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn’t care, they also don’t care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry, and tired. (Habila, 2011, p. 108)

Rufus ethically supports the rebellion of the local people. When James offers him a lot of money to rescue his kidnapped wife, Rufus thinks, “Wasn’t he in my country, polluting my environment, making millions in this process?” (Habila, 2011, p. 111). Rufus considers the violence and revolt on the part of the Indigenous people to fight for ecological justice as justified and purposeful because it possibly leads to the betterment of their overwhelmed environment and lives. Habila’s *Oil on Water* gives a realistic and gruesome portrayal of the commodification of the river water and the ensuing war which distresses Boma’s life by burning her face. Boma is ultimately deserted by her husband John. The family collapses, and she falls into a state of psychological agony. This particular tale of Boma’s suffering hints at the general predicament of the local people of the Niger Delta.

In *Early Writings of Karl Marx*, Marx (1975) maintains: “Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (p. 328). Hence, in Marxist belief, humans and nature should be in concord. As the capitalist government overuses and abuses nature and its resources through globalization and industrialization for profit, it enforces slavery on the working class or the “proletarians.” In *Oil on Water*, the Indigenous communities who are enslaved by the neo-colonial hegemony of the oil companies are connected to the shrine by their religion and their respect for the chief priest. Amidst all sorts of Western subjugation, there is a decolonizing movement perceived in the revolt of the Indigenous people against the oil extracting companies as they resolutely choose to conform to their religious beliefs and practices. John Grim (2023) argues,

...indigenous religions as lifeways that have strong ethnic identity attractors in the local ecology continue to resist intruding ways of life that seek to colonize and erase them... indigenous religions is directly related to this role of "religion" as at the core of indigenous cultural identity. In the long history of colonial and neocolonial theft of material and cultural life, indigenous lifeways have remained the source of deepest resistance to dominance by outsiders. (para. 22)

In the Nigerian villages depicted in *Oil on Water*, most of the villagers are fishermen, and they share a bond with water as they live in close proximity to water and nature. Likewise, Redvers et al. (2023) observe, "Indigenous Peoples' close connections to land, water, and ecosystems, however, have placed them at increasing vulnerability from the effects of climate change" (1)

In *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water*, Kathleen Dean Moore (1995) explores the link between water and time and water and history: "The river carries a history of the land and the people who live on the land, stories collected from a thousand feeder streams and recorded in pockets of sand, in the warm and cold currents, the smells of the water, the mayflies" (p. xi). In *Oil on Water*, the worshippers believe in the healing power of nature. Rufus seems skeptical regarding Zaq's decision to stay back at the shrine when a doctor should treat him. Naaman, the Chief Priest of the shrine assures Rufus, "We have a nurse here and she will attend to you. But perhaps you won't need her. The air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen" (Habila, 2011, p. 84). Boma also finds solace in nature when she starts living with the worshippers. Rufus reflects,

This was a place of healing and soon she'd forget John, her scars would recede to the back of her mind and one day she'd look in the mirror and see they were gone. I had felt the same optimism days ago when I looked back from the militants' boat at Chief Ibiram and his people. (Habila, 2011, p. 216).

This observation of Rufus exemplifies how pure natural elements have the magical power to help afflicted people recover physically and psychologically. Boma is revived and most of her bodily and mental wounds are healed as she is one with nature.

## Conclusion

The eco-Marxist reading of Habila's *Oil on Water* reveals how the political and economic structures created by the capitalists, i.e., the British oil companies are the roots of environmental degradation, social inequality, and injustice to nature and the poor Indigenous people. Habila highlights the ecological consequences of neoliberal pursuits, specifically on freshwater – land and water pollution, depletion of freshwater resources, and scarcity of drinking water. It also highlights the affected poor and the non-human world – two marginalized and overlooked sections during the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. The novel portrays human-induced environmental upheavals in the "vernacular landscape" (Nixon, 2011, p. 17) of the poor communities of the Niger Delta. *Oil on Water* which begins as a journalistic account, actually diatribes against the devastating consequences of pollution of the river water. Overall, a focus on the toxic aquatic spaces as narrated by Habila allows the reader to see how the river is treated as a commodity to be abused recklessly for various material pursuits.

The novel mirrors Nigeria's oil-induced pollution of water and an existential crisis of the local people of the Niger Delta, who are underprivileged and depend on natural resources for earning their livelihood. Similarly, for instance, in contemporary Nigeria, the Ughelli oil communities utterly suffer from environmental pollution of various types (Omoweh, 1995). Besides, Alicia Fentiman (1996) investigates the village of Oloma, a rural fishing community on the Island of Bonny in the Eastern Niger Delta and divulges the oil-induced plight of the Indigenous people.

*Oil on Water* offers glimpses of how the delta villages and islands are wrecked by environmental and water pollution caused by thoughtless oil extraction. The novel does not end the story with an abrupt redemption that incredibly resolves all the complications arising from the oil mining industries; rather, it keeps its dialogic structure offering an open and vague ending (Okuyade, 2016). Through this tale of the pollution of water and the disruption of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta, the novel also calls the reader's attention to other regions of the world, where similar types of industrial pollution go on unrestrained. This paper has proved that freshwater which is considered the source of life can also be the reason for diseases and death if it is contaminated or impure. Through the overt assessment of the Capitalocene, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* advocates the necessity of the revival of a biocentric way of life and ecologically sustainable economic developments in the contemporary era which witnesses environmental degradations and existential crises of vulnerable Indigenous communities in Nigeria and the world.

#### **Declaration of Conflicts of Interests:**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

#### **Funding Disclosure:**

This paper received no specific grant from any agency.

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