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Postcolonial Trauma and Environmental Despoliation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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***Abstract*:** This study looks at Helon Habila's novel, *Oil on Water* (2012) in its engagement of the destruction of the landscape and reflection of the nature of socio-economic conditions of citizens of the Niger Delta of contemporary Nigeria. The novel reveals the domestic and social ruptures that the devastation of the ecology by man's hunt for fortune has occasioned. By using Frantz Fanon's postcolonial notion of colonial mentality as a preferred approach to this discourse, the study critically analyses the novel and views the novelist's utilization of the changing scenery as a creative trope for the description of trauma. Through the pulsating narrative of the quest for the kidnapped British wife of an expatriate petroleum executive, the excesses of colonial institutions and the complicity of government functionaries in despoiling the region are brought to the fore. Thus, personalities are redefined and communities are either restructured or dispersed in a fashion that re-events the colonial reality. The conclusion is drawn on the supposition that environmental wreckage resulting from industrial production reveals a paradox of lack in the midst of abundance for the individual and the community. The work enjoins literary artists to seek avenues for constructing new tales that will acknowledge the distortion and also fascinate readers beyond the parables that western trauma doctrine endorses.
***Key Words*:** Landscape, Postcolonial theory, Environmental trauma, Wreckage.

Introduction

In postcolonial literature, disaster narratives have often registered a compelling presence, reaching across regional and political divides to reveal a broader perspective of human suffering. The ensuing effects of natural traumas, take even greater significance when considered from the view-point of Frantz Fanon's categorization of citizens and subjectivities of the developing world as "the wretched people of the

earth." Countries that fit into this mould have a long history of the dehumanizing effects of slavery, the pain of colonial conquest and oppression, agitations for independence, and futile efforts of post-independence nation-building. Their narratives are usually viewed against the milieu of psychological torture, virtual and visible rape as well as the depletion of the rich resources of their land. For some countries which have had political autonomy for more than half a century, social fractures that had been ingrained in their experiences during the era of colonialism have continued to linger to the present moment.

In the conversation that continues to challenge imperial notions, radical transformation is frequently reflected to present an insight that human tragedy is no longer constricted to the isolated grandiose event. It is now taken as an experience that is instigated by an assortment of factors. Luckhurst (2008) citing Bruno Latour in a different context has described the challenges confronting man across cultures as "knots" or "hybrid assemblages" that respond to "questions of science, law, technology, capitalism, politics, medicine and risk" (14-15).

In the light of colonial realities, Fanon has argued that the psychic problems that impact on the colonial subject have become even more multifaceted than ever before, as we consider the "array of the larger problems of modernity" (iv). In the era of the post colony, several reflections of our habitually modernizing world are listed as instigating elements that complicate life further. As such, the old methods that Western scholars have provided for the enterprise of analyzing the human condition, have become obsolete and redundant (Afolayan 2014). This is so because such methods had originally been fashioned for an intellectual assessment of socio-cultural conditions of the Westerner, and they do not agree with the realities of our dynamic world. Earlier on, Caruth (1995) had succeeded in stirring the debate among scholars by challenging them to inquire into other sites of cultural realities that serve as essential factors in the definition of trauma. For this, Rothberg (2014 xiii) welcomes the call for the decolonization of trauma theory so that new paradigms would be introduced to displace "those of classical, psychoanalysis-inspired predecessors."

Consequent upon the foregoing, this work engages Frantz Fanon's postcolonial thought which views the colonial contact between Western powers and the developing societies of the South as a violent encounter that cannot be redressed outside the context of violent resistance. Fanon had argued that owing to the nature of colonial conquest which "first encounter was marked by violence" (26), displacing the structures of such a system which were entrenched "by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannon[sic]" cannot be achieved through "magical practices… or friendly understanding" (25). Drawing from this Fanonian argument which endorses the use of violence to dislodge colonial structures, the paper examines how Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2012) portrays characters whose frequent experience of upsetting incidents exacerbates their hopeless plunge into the quagmire of denied

existence. It views the novel's depiction of lurid violence as an experience that disperses communities and redefines individuals – settlers and natives alike. In order to liberate themselves from their confined conditions, the oppressed natives take their destinies into their own hands by taking the battle to the group that had all through their chequered history been the aggressor. The consequences are far-reaching as they impact on both the settler and the native. Nevertheless, the degree of impact for the warring clans is not the same.

Review of Traditional Trauma Notions

It is essential to note that human misfortune is not revealed exclusively where we seek opportunities to draw a line between the perpetrator and the victim of a traumatizing incident. Sometimes, even in the event of a natural disaster, which is evidently an act of nature, we are apt to probe further, seeking explanations for how someone may have either directly or remotely contributed to the disaster. For instance, lingering pain resulting from human-induced climate change and environmental degradation as manifested in industrial sites across the globe, impacts adversely on man in a manner that is different from event-based extremities. Nixon (2009:2) describes this as a kind of 'slow violence'. On this, he encourages scholars to pay attention to the kind of violence that is neither stunning nor immediate, "but rather incremental and accretive."

Rothberg insists that recognizing the brand of violence that is slow but sustained should place a demand on scholars to seek new parameters for assessing painful experiences that displace the situation of the victim and the perpetrator. His concept of human tragedy, highlighting the incongruities of the impact of climate change perpetrated by the rich West, the pain of which is borne more significantly by the poor South is in accord with Fanon and Marxist postcolonial notions, both of which are hinged on a system that foregrounds a persistent exploitation of the weak by the strong.

In an attempt to adopt the Anthropecene – classical notion of trauma – Chakrabarty (2009) describes the material reality of the modern age by linking the insight of "geological agency" to postcolonial thoughts with an all-embracing awareness of a general challenge. This is not to minimize "the historical role that the richer and mainly western nations have played in emitting greenhouse gases…[b]ut scientists' discovery of the fact that human beings have in a process [of capitalist modernization] become a geological agent points to a shared catastrophe that we have all fallen into" (218).

Chakrabarty's analysis presents a paradox of the climate as another agent of human suffering, admitting that catastrophes arising from changes in the climate are "unintended consequence[s] of human actions" (221). The temporality and subjectivity that this contradiction implies should inspire further inquiry into facets that trauma scholarship is yet to address satisfactorily. This is further revealed in the conversation on industrial production and the consequential climate change. Our fear is further

justified when we note that colonial theories are ill-equipped and predictably reluctant to adequately and objectively account for the experiences of people in other climates that are still subsisting at the fringes of a modern world that is propelled by the train of capitalist production.

West and non-West dichotomy is crucial to our appreciation of the conflicting western theories and postcolonial discourse. Kwame (1991: 346) had stated that retheorization that will accommodate the proliferated contexts of our modern world should not be undervalued in a mono-cultural sense. To define the preoccupation of postcolonial discourse therefore, it is usually considered as a mixed-grill of intellectual engagements that scrutinizes the circumstances of colonial encounters between the developed nations of the North and the developing nations of the South. Afolayan sees this in the context of a critical review of the "literal encumbrance of relationship between erstwhile colonial masters and their ex-colonies" (315). On his part, Oyegoke (2000: 279) believes that "The temporality and spatialization of postcoloniality in African writing makes the seductive attraction more irresistible (as) the terms seek to describe literary and intellectual activity emanating from the vast, frequently misunderstood and ill-used space named Africa". He takes the argument further by stating that African literature has the peculiarity which stands it out as a genre that has always been "multicultural, polyglot and increasingly multiracial" (283).

The Westerner usually savors the erroneous perception that former subjugated societies are homogeneous cultural entities. It is by this same assumption, during the era of colonialism that the colonizing powers of the West embarked on the forceful balkanization of homogeneous groups and integration of those that are heterogeneous. In a vicious sense, a similar scenario is still being played out again in the form of typifying contiguous societies and their respective cultures. Afolayan observes that beyond the far-reaching remarks on existing unequal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, "the heterogeneity of ex-colonies which had existed before the time of imperialism becomes even more complex after autonomies were granted" (317). In spite of the obvious differences between the sub-entities, postcolonial discourse points at the blurring lines, which seem to make the previous differences between them inconsequential. To a limited extent, this broad labeling may be factual; but the varying temporal and spatial indicators would no longer permit us to always make such sweeping generalizations.

Traumatic Aftermaths of Colonial Exploitation in *Oil on Water*

Oil on Water is a fictive narrative of the physical violence that the oil-rich communities of the riverine region of Nigeria suffer as a result of oil exploration activities. The story which is episodic in structure opens with the report that Isabel Floode, the British wife of an expatriate engineer has been kidnapped. It is the incident that would lead to the search for which Zaq, a veteran journalist would be contracted to locate the kidnappers and mediate

between them and James Floode, the kidnapped woman's husband. Zaq therefore leads a pack of journalists on a boat cruise that takes them into the heart of the creeks that is believed to be the militants' fortress. But in a strange twist of events, Zaq himself dies in the course of the search for Isabel having contracted a water-borne hemorrhagic disease which Dr. Dagogo-Mark describes as "dengue fever." The other journalists who had initially been enthused by the allure of career fame soon suffer disillusionment when they discover that their expedition has not only become interminable but life-threatening.

The novelist frequently presents a panoramic view of the sea and the villages along the creeks and from time-to-time, reveals how the search crew comes across unsettling images of despoiled ecology and floating carcasses. Through the eye of Rufus who has submitted himself to Zaq's mentorship, Habila reveals gory impressions of the exploitative and destructive activities of the oil extracting firms. According to Rufus, they "saw a human arm severed at the elbow bobbing away… its fingers opening and closing, beckoning" (34). The effect that this spectacle registers on the witnesses is grim. Several days afterwards, the lingering memory of the "lone arm floating away, sometimes with its middle finger extended derisively, before disappearing into the dark mist" (34) continues to torment Rufus. He states that, compounded with recurring brushes with death, the morale of the group continues to suffer a downward gradient. With the prolonged uncertainty about the fate of Isabel, they make a rational decision to return to mainland Port Harcourt.

The first village the explorers pass through looks "as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it." (7). The narrator reports that at the back of one of the houses, they discover a chicken pen with all the occupant's dead. In an evocative manner, he draws the reader's attention to the decomposing remains of the occupants whose maggots are "trafficking beneath the feathers" (ibid.). From every indication, this village used to be a thriving one, luminous with life, but it has now become a desolate shadow of its old self. A stroll from "one squat brick structure to the next, from compound to compound… [reveals rooms that] … were all empty, with wide open windows askew on broken hinges." (ibid.)

The aftermath of oil-exploration that is reflected in the many deserted villages is a clear reflection of the social tragedy that Rodney (1972) describes as the disrupted life of a community that was once thriving and self-sustaining. The narrator explains that the gloom that pervades the atmosphere over these communities is picturesque of the restiveness instigated by the destructive agents of industrialization and modernity. The oil companies leave on the trail of their production activities, abandoned rigs, oil spillage that pollutes the surrounding water, dead fish bobbing up on water surface and decomposing animals killed either by hunger or by exposure to the chemicals seeping out as industrial wastes. Further indicators are infestation of mosquitoes with their swarms of larvae paddling

over the surface of every collection of water (8, 9, 71-72).

To register their discontent with the persistent rape of the resources of the land, angry young men in the novel take up arms to sabotage the activities of the oil firms. In desperate situations, they resort to kidnapping oil workers, especially the expatriates and their family members on whom they demand huge ransoms. Greed takes a better hold of the militants considering the huge fortune that their militancy brings to them.

It is significant to note that the horrendous episodes in the creeks validate Fanon's view that colonialism with all the institutions that shot out from it is usually sustained by violence. Accordingly, violent resistance and assertion is what the colonized subject will need to do in order to stem its tide (*The Wretched of the Earth* 25). In an approach that is akin to Soyinka's depiction of violence in *The Man Died* and *Season of Anomy,* Habila echoes Fanon's "defense of violence against the colonial oppressor" (Whitefield 25), He insists in his call in *Oil on Water* that both at the level of the individual and the community that violence begets violence. Thus, violence is an inevitable tool left for the native to use for the protection of his interest. For the community, the people are forced to band up in the commonality of their trauma to dislodge a common foe, which in this instance encompasses all the residues of colonial oppression.

Despoiled Landscape as Trope for the Portrayal of Traumatic Reality

In a narrative style that is reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway's novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), Habila presents a panoramic view of the sea to reveal the depressing circumstances of some of his characters. The scenery leaves the reader in a state of suspense where he continues to anticipate that something ominous would happen. In one of the episodes, he likens the mournful atmosphere that hangs over the crew to that of a ghost ship. Even the engine of the boat transporting them is "muffled by the saturated air" (9). They are suffused by a haunting silence as they cruise over "the black expressionless water [where]… no birds or fish or other water creatures" are in sight (loc. cit).

Even though seafaring may actually hold an appeal to a wanderlust adventurer, a seemingly interminable voyage such as the one in which the anxious reporters have embarked upon, turns out disappointingly to be an uninspiring and an unexciting voyage. Thus, the uncertainty that hangs over the seascape continues to evoke a sensation of tragic eventuality that neither the crew nor the string of communities can do anything to avert. Even the occasional stopovers at some of the villages along their route offer little or no succor to the fatigued and disillusioned explorers. In their spent state, they are depressed with another unsettling realization that the promise of a safe haven for them to camp for the night cannot be fulfilled. This turn of events is contrary to the assurance that they had received from their guide, Tamuno that his friend Karibi would house them for the night. The reason for their reluctance to host the journalists is that a military invasion on the village was imminent. It results in

eerie pandemonium both for the residents and the passers-by. The following conversation expresses their fear and vulnerability:

…. Him say we must go. We no fit stay.
- But we just got here. Is something wrong?
- Yes. Dem hear say soja de come here today. Dem de come find am.
- Find am for what?
- ….
- Dem say he de help de militants.
- So why isn't he hiding? (11)

A community that is this terrified is in no position to offer shelter to strangers whose real mission is still shrouded in mystery. As a result of the commotion, which has become a frequent experience among the creek dwellers, friendship and filial ties are frequently sacrificed for the sake of self-preservation. For example, in a later episode, Rufus describes how a similar scenario manifests in the relationship between him and Boma his sister. Even though she is compelled to move into his small room for a temporary accommodation after her husband had abandoned her, he is unable to render any lasting assistance that would lighten her scarred face.

In a bid to depict the contrast between urban life and rural life, Habila presents the relative comforting atmosphere of the Lagos Bar Beach under which floundering people bask, and he juxtaposes it to the tense atmosphere under which the communities of the Niger delta manage to scratch a living. Through the character of Zaq, Habila presents the contrasting conflict that some of his characters find themselves– first as a Lagos socialite, and secondly as a veteran journalist leading other reporters on the quest for the abducted British woman in the riverine villages. Through the dramatic turn of events in Zaq's life, Habila is able to present an objective perspective on the injustice suffered by the oil-producing villages.

In his narration, Rufus reports that right from the time that the journalists set out from Irikefe on the trail of the kidnappers, they are frequently confronted with disturbing sights of "abandoned villages…. hopeless landscape…[and] gas flares that always burned in the distance." (23). Nine days into the search, after the other reporters had returned to Port Harcourt, Rufus begins to entertain the thought that the entire exercise is after all misadventure (3-4). He too has started missing the relative peace and promise of a better life that attracts people to the city.

The irony in the comparison that Habila draws between life in the city and survival in the riverine villages is reflected in the fact that the ostentatious life style of city dwellers is actually financed by the resources harnessed from the degraded wetlands of the oil-producing communities. Tragically, life in the villages does not hold any appeal to the residents. That is why Tamuno makes a passionate appeal to the journalists to take his malnourished and sea-washed son, Michael to Port Harcourt where he is optimistic that he will enjoy a more promising future.

From every indication, life in the creeks has not treated him well as Rufus' description of his appearance reveals:

> 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)

Having missed the chance to be accommodated in the first few villages they visited, the determined Tamuno with his son serving as guide to the journalists takes them to his own village. On arrival, Chief Ibiram welcomes them and graciously hosts them for the night. The condition of living in this village contrasts sharply with that of the other villages that have suffered the devastating impact of oil exploration activities. From every indication, it is yet to be torched by the polluting influences of modernity.

Habila is consistent in ensuring that Chief Ibiram's village remains anonymous because the residents are perennially nomadic. But unlike the journalists who are on the trail of the kidnappers, the village is on its own quest for communal peace and tranquility, which can be found only in places that are far from the polluting activities of the oil companies and the violence that they often provoke. Presently, they can still boast of houses that enjoy the mirth and warmth of a healthy and a thriving community. They even enjoy the luxury of sufficient food, which they are most willing to share with visitors. To a reasonable degree, they can also boast of a modicum of security, where they are free from any form of infiltration from outside. To the narrator, every event in the surroundings is an essential element for reassuring the visitors and even the reader that Chief Ibiram's village has all the necessities for life. For instance, the smoke from the hearth that streams out through the thatch roof is indicative of lively and promising human activity that the other ransacked villages have lost. The old woman telling stories to children is also a reminder of what life used to be in the other villages that now can only boast of broken monuments which are relics of a glorious past. It is the same reason why Rufus is encouraged at the moment of his waking up to "hear the voices of children and women." (24). We are however reminded that the present state of affairs in the village may not be permanent after all, because the clan's present location is its fifth since the Chief Molabo led his clansmen to flee their ancestral village owing to the threat that gas flaring and other exploration activities had posed to their lives.

By narrating the harmonious atmosphere that permeates Chief Ibiram's village, Habila reflects on the pattern of life that predates the era of colonialism. He draws our attention to the once flourishing industry that has now been truncated by colonial contact. During the primeval period as portrayed in the novel, men, women and children were all gainfully and rewardingly engaged in agrarian and fishing vocations. The men were not idle, neither were the women and the children. For instance,

the men who had gone out to fish at the wake of dawn, are sighted at the end of a rewarding fishing expedition "hauling their canoes out of shallow water and tying them to the house stilt" (25). The narrator reports that they have brought in their catch in plastic buckets and wicker baskets evidencing a bountiful catch. They relish the harvest and this satisfaction puts a smile on each of their faces.

As promising as their condition seems to be, Habila alerts us to the bleak future that awaits the residents of the village. The narrator bemoans the fact that their own peace and promise may soon suffer the same fate of the other plundered villages once the explorers, the military and the militants set their foot on its soil. The imagery that the novel conjures by personifying the sun as "huge and dying, spilling orange and red" (25) symbolizes the prosperity of primordial societies which is threatened and disrupted by the ravaging system of colonialism and industrialization. The system continues to ravage the ecosystem that had previously sustained human life. Contrasting to the peace and economic buoyancy enjoyed in Ibiram's village is the "rust on the shallow river and the mangroves" that the other villages suffer as a result of colonial contact (25). Rufus melancholically reflects on how some of the resources have disappeared, recalling his boyhood days when he and his sister used to catch crabs. But the crabs have long disappeared. He laments that even the "water is not good" (25). With the use of flashback, the narrator mourns the reality that the surrounding water has been polluted to the extreme condition that now endangers aquatic life on which the communities used to thrive. He remembers that before things actually went sour, he had sustained himself from selling crabs that he picked at the shores. From the money he made from this harmless trade, he paid his way through school. All this is only recollected as a nostalgic reflection of a season of prosperity that gradually disappeared when industrial explorers invaded the communities.

From the foregoing, Habila reveals the consequences of the despoliation of the environment on the living conditions of some of his characters. They undergo periodic personality transmutations, which the narration reveals as fallouts from the extreme conditions that they are often exposed to. Noteworthy is the fact that Zaq's personality dips from a person full of life and zest to a wasted man waiting for his painful death. Zaq had been introduced as a nationally celebrated journalist when he featured as a guest speaker at the Lagos School of Journalism. Afterwards, at the Chinese Restaurant, where he is celebrated by many girls and admirers, his wit and enthusiasm as a celebrity is revealed. But his riotous life style, especially in the area of excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages is one that sets him on the sloppy path of self destruction. As much as everyone is desirous to listen to his wit and pay attention to the tips that he jocularly shares from his journalistic experience, Zaq is perceived to be a person who "seemed more focused on getting wasted" in his excessive consumption of intoxicating drinks (18).

As a result of his heavy exposure to the elements and to the sewage of industrial production, Zaq's immunity to dengue fever collapses. Tragically set on an irreversible slide to his end, he loses his wit and he becomes introverted and melancholic. We see him gaze vacantly at life and the glitz of career success as an abyss of hopeless adventure, his frustration and general irritability becoming increasingly manifest (26-7). His failing health is a metaphor of the state of the plundered land that had at a certain time in the past been a very fertile and sustaining one. The destruction that his abuse of alcohol has wrecked on his health is similar to the abuse that the once fertile land and water resources of the creeks have been subjected to through the persistent rape of the gifts of nature, resulting in the irreparable degradation of the environment by oil exploring companies. Zaq's career is therefore truncated in the same way that the dreams and the aspirations of the Niger Delta people have been shattered.

At the social level, Habila portrays Chief Ibiram's village as a community whose collective will to distance itself from the ravaging influences of city life and industrial pollution is now broken. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator describes Ibiram as a rudderless and an uncertain chief whose clan is at the mercy of the rising flood water which has forced them to relocate again (185). His clan is also threatened by the militants who now see him as a traitor trying to return Isabel to Port Harcourt for a reward (197-197). He now leads the surviving members of his clan northwards, towards Port Harcourt, the very place that their patriarch, Chief Molabo had turned his back on just a while ago (182-183). It is a traumatizing admittance of defeat to the suffocating and ravaging influence of industrial production powerfully financed by the oil companies, which are agents of the rich nations of the West The failure of Ibiram's clan to maintain the tempo of its resistance to Western influences confirms Fanon's conclusion that the colonial system which derives its sustenance from violent domination and repression is still as vicious as it was during the era of pre-independence.

The discussion in this study may not have focused on the sufferings of Isabel Foolde during the period, but it is essential to observe that her abduction is just one of the trouble realities of her life. She had suffered loneliness, alienation owing to the geographical and psychological distance from her husband long before she discovered his betrayal in having an illicit affair with his maidservant. Her trauma which stems from marital insecurity resulted in her excessive reaction that culminated in the events leading to her kidnap. Even for James her husband, whose indiscretions with the maid, a lover to Salomon his driver is the trigger-point for the erratic actions of Isabel. James suffers his own trauma as he agonizes over the kind of torture that his wife would be subjected to in the hands of her kidnappers. When he offers to join the search party, it turns out to be desperate move to atone for his illicit affairs, but he is restrained from doing that because of the fear that he was vulnerable to being kidnapped by his

wife's abductors. Zaq like James during the period of his physical and emotional torment, embraces alcohol for solace.

Conclusion

This study has drawn on the conversation of postcolonial trauma to argue that the future of trauma theory lies in extending her look beyond the traditional characterization of the perpetrator of trauma and the victim. The line that separates the perpetrator from the victim of trauma in the 21st century world is blurred as Habila reveals that the actors can be undeniable members of either sides of the divide. The definition of what constitutes human suffering varies from one cultural setting to another. For the people of the delta villages, their individual and social tragedies are fueled by confutations arising from the complicity of local and foreign forces whose actions erode the very elements upon which the communities had subsisted for generations.

In the context of Fanon's postulation that colonial encounters are disruptive of the developmental processes of primordial societies, the characters in *Oil on Water* are torn between the conflicts in a technological-driven modern world where the consequences of domestic suffering, and perpetration of violence on a communal scale and the despoliation of natural endowments may from time-to-time overlap. This study has therefore viewed the novel as a fictive portrayal of the ugliness that laces postcolonial subjects' quest for personal and communal solace in a rapidly disintegrating world. It concludes by contemplating Habila's success at utilizing his creative resources to reveal the changing nature of violence and power, which objective is to continue in the tradition of distinguishing between the privileged powerful South and the oppressed poor North.

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