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JOURNALISTIC FORM AND ECO-CRITICAL NARRATIVE IN HELON HABILA'S *Oil on Water*

HALIMA SHEHU; & BALA MUHAMMED DALHATU
General Studies, School of Science and Technology Education, Federal University of Technology, Minna
Corresponding Author: halimashehu@futminna.edu.ng
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Abstract
One of the defining crises of the twenty-first century is environmental degradation, a condition that has intensified the growth of eco-literature and eco-criticism. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* emerges as a pivotal text that interrogates the ecological and socio-political consequences of crude oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. While existing scholarship has largely centred on the novel's representation of eco-conflict, this study focuses a less examined dimension: the deployment of journalistic form as a structuring principle of the narrative. Through an eco-critical and narratological framework, the study examines how the novel adopts investigative techniques, testimonial modes, and reportage aesthetics to construct its account of environmental crisis. It argues that the fusion of fiction and journalistic inquiry not only intensifies the representation of ecological devastation and human displacement but also reconfigures narrative authority, linking environmental realities with mediated testimony. In doing so, the novel demonstrates how journalistic form enhances the ethical and political force of eco-critical narrative.

Keywords: Eco-Critical Narrative, Journalistic Form, Petrofiction, Environmental Justice

Introduction
Environmental degradation has become one of the defining catastrophes of the twenty-first century driven by the aggressive extraction of natural resources and the prioritization of profit over ecological wellbeing. In Nigeria's Niger Delta, decades of crude oil exploitation have generated profound ecological degradation, entrenched socio-political marginalisation, and widespread human suffering (Ritchie & Roser, 2020). These conditions constitute the backdrop of *Oil on Water*

by Helon Habila, a novel widely examined for its depiction of eco-conflict (Bhandari, 2024; Edebor, 2017; Iortyer & Ntamu, 2020). Yet, an equally significant but understudied dimension of the text lies in its narrative form.

This study argues that *Oil on Water* mobilizes journalistic inquiry not merely as a thematic device but as a structuring principle that aligns the novel with the logic, constraints, and epistemological tensions of investigative reporting. Through reportage, eyewitness testimony and field observation, the narrative constructs a literary mode for representing ecocide. The novel's fusion of fiction and journalistic technique produces a hybrid form that not only documents environmental devastation but also interrogates how such crises are witnessed, interpreted and narrated. In doing so, it foregrounds the ethical and epistemological stakes of representation in contexts of ecological crisis.

By integrating eco-critical and narrative-analytical frameworks, this study examines how Habila's deployment of reportage-style narration in *Oil on Water* shapes the reader's understanding of environmental destruction and its human costs. The novel's formal architecture rooted in journalistic inquiry, observational detail and testimonial fragments, invites the reader to encounter the Niger Delta not merely as a setting of ecological devastation but as a space whose realities must be pursued, uncovered and interpreted. In this way, narrative form becomes an analytic lens through which the text exposes how the region's ecological crisis resists singular modes of representation, demanding instead, storytelling practices that blur the boundaries between fiction, reportage and witness-bearing.

Oil on Water demonstrates that narrative technique is inseparable from ecological critique. Its hybridised form mirrors the fragmented, obscured and contested nature of environmental truth in the Niger Delta. The environmental crisis is revealed to be both a material catastrophe eroding ecosystems, livelihoods and communal structures as well as a representational challenge that requires innovative narrative strategies that capture the complexity of the lived experience of ecocide. Through this fusion of form and content, Habila foregrounds the ethical and epistemological stakes of narrating environmental harm. He demonstrates that how the story is told is central to what can be perceived, understood, and ultimately confronted.

Ecological Criticism, Environmental Crisis, and Narrative Theory

Early eco-critical discourse shaped by the Romantic tradition of writers such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Keats emphasized the sublime, spiritual, and restorative dimensions of the natural world. However, contemporary eco-literature and eco-criticism have shifted toward analysing the complex interactions between humans and the environment, concentrating on the urgency of environmental justice and the need to rethink human–nature relationships. As Estok (2001) notes, modern eco-criticism "has distinguished itself… first by the ethical stance it adopts, treating the natural world as a vital entity rather than merely an

object of thematic exploration, and secondly, by its commitment to forging connections" (p.201). Building on Buell's (1995)foundational definition of eco-criticism as "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (p.430), this study examines how *Oil on Water* critiques ecological degradation while representing the natural world as an active, contested arena shaped by social, political and economic forces.

Central to this analysis is Hall's (2013) conceptualization of "environmental insecurity," a framework essential for understanding the socio-ecological dynamics that structure the world of Habila's novel. Hall defines environmental insecurity as the risks arising from environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and the resulting social tensions that emerge at individual, communal, and state levels (p.863). This perspective highlights both human actions and structural conditions that impede sustainable resource use and intensify social inequalities and conflict **(Brisman & South, 2013).**These interrelated dynamics are vividly portrayed in *Oil on Water* which depicts communities ravaged by oil spills, gas flaring, displacement and the loss of livelihoods thereby revealing the inextricable relationship between ecological destruction and socio-political instability in the Niger Delta.

Within this eco-critical framework, Habila's novel does more than merely document environmental devastation, instead, it conceptualizes the Niger Delta as a contested ecological and political space whose degradation cannot be disentangled from the violence, exploitation, and human suffering that accompany petroleum extraction. An additional dimension emerges when narrative theory is brought into conversation with eco-criticism and journalism studies. Narrative theory, concerned with how stories are structured, mediated and authenticated, illuminates the significance of Habila's adoption of journalistic inquiry as a narrative mode. This alignment situates the novel within what Hartsock (2000) describes as the tradition of literary journalism where reportage functions as a mode of narrative inquiry shaped by uncertainty, subjectivity and ethical witnessing.

The investigative frame of *Oil on Water* structured through fragmented encounters and shifting testimonies produces a form of literary reportage that mirrors the instability, opacity and incompleteness of the ecological crisis itself. Contemporary studies of literary journalism highlight immersion, scenic reconstruction, and experiential modes of truth-telling as defining features of narrative reportage (Hartsock, 2016; Harrington & Sager, 2014). These features are evident in Habila's text where the journalists' movement through devastated landscapes and their accumulation of contradictory testimonies replicate the experiential demands of investigative reporting. However, immersion does not yield epistemological certainty. Rather, the novel exposes the limits of journalistic knowledge, echoing Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt's (2014) argument that journalism performs a mode of "memory work" through which societies negotiate, organize, and give meaning to public events. Their account emphasizes that journalism

does not merely record occurrences but actively shapes collective understanding through institutional routines, narrative framing and the broader political contexts within which news is produced. In *Oil on Water*, this insight becomes particularly resonant because truth emerges not as a stable or verifiable fact but as a mediated construct continually refracted through competing testimonies, selective representations, and the ideological pressures that govern access to information. The novel thus positions journalistic practice as a site of both revelation and occlusion, underscoring how reportage is conditioned by the very structures of authority and power it seeks to illuminate.

By adopting, reworking and ultimately destabilizing the conventions of narrative journalism, *Oil on Water* demonstrates how journalistic form can operate as an eco-critical method. The novel mobilizes techniques that are associated with reportage, that is, investigation, eyewitness testimony, scene construction, and documentary detail exposing the fragility and partiality of the knowledge that these techniques produce. In doing so, it suggests that neither journalism nor fiction alone is adequate to fully register the complexity of ecocide, rather, their fusion generates a hybrid mode of literary reportage that is capable of illuminating both the material devastation of the Niger Delta and the interpretive frameworks through which that devastation becomes legible. Such a narrative strategy underscores that ecological crisis is not only an environmental condition but also an epistemological problem shaped by political interests, media representations and structures of visibility and erasure. In this sense, the novel extends Heise's (2008) argument for environmental narratives that link ecological awareness with broader questions of social and political accountability. By entwining ecological observation with critiques of journalistic authority, *Oil on Water* foregrounds the interdependence of environmental degradation, human vulnerability and the narrative systems through which communities attempt to understand and respond to crisis.

Through its hybrid structure which merges journalistic inquiry with fictional storytelling, *Oil on Water* establishes a distinctive narrative model for representing environmental crisis. By foregrounding investigative procedures, interviews, on-site observation and detailed documentation, Habila reconfigures the tools of journalism as literary strategies capable of rendering ecological devastation both vividly and ethically. The novel thus bridges factual reportage and imaginative narration to enable readers not only apprehend the material consequences of environmental degradation but also to confront its human costs, including displacement, illness, psychological trauma as well as the erosion of livelihoods and cultural knowledge. In this way, the narrative renders visible the intertwined suffering of people and environment underscoring the social, political, moral as well as physical consequences of ecocide simultaneously.

The hybrid narrative form adopted in the novel is particularly effective in representing ecocide. Its formal flexibility accommodates fragmented and uneven realities mirroring the dispersed and cumulative nature of environmental violence across both landscape

and community. This narrative approach is marked by an ethical attentiveness that bears witness to human and nonhuman suffering without reducing it to abstraction or a mere narrative device. At the same time, the novel foregrounds the deep entanglement of ecological and human destinies, demonstrating that the exploitation of natural resources is inseparable from the social, political and moral crises that shape life in the Niger Delta. Furthermore, by combining the rigour of investigative reporting with the imaginative capacities of fiction, Habila crafts an eco-narrative that is both ethically engaged and aesthetically innovative. This fusion affirms literature's capacity not only to document and interpret environmental crises but also to intervene in them by centering the experiences of those most affected. His blend of journalistic realism and fictional storytelling compels readers to encounter the Niger Delta through the immediacy of witness accounts, field observations, and the dilemmas embedded in the act of recording suffering. This interplay between eco-critical concerns and narrative technique enhances the novel's ability to communicate the multifaceted realities of oil exploitation, including the power structures that sustain ecological and social injustice. In this way, *Oil on Water* demonstrates how narrative form and environmental critique mutually reinforce one another. The novel's structure shapes how the crisis is perceived while the ecological devastation it depicts determines the narrative strategies through which it must be told.

Eco-literature in Nigeria

Nigeria's eco-literary tradition has early roots in the works of writers such as **Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Cyprian Ekwensi** and **Gabriel Okara** whose environmental sensibilities were shaped directly or indirectly by Romantic conceptions of nature. This orientation is more explicit in the poetry of **third-generation Nigerian writers**, particularly **Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Nnimmo Bassey, Harry Garuba** and **Remi Raji** who collectively constitute what Egya (2020) identifies as an "alternative" tradition more committed to exploring humanity's fraught relationship with the natural world (p.66). Their work laments the devastation of once-abundant landscapes, critiques the predatory logic of petro-capitalism and articulates an ecological ethics grounded in communal memory.

Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998) exemplifies this dual commitment. In "When Green Was the Lingua Franca," the Niger Delta appears as a landscape "teeming with life" (p.12) and offering "compensation for all" (p.13), a harmony later ruptured by multinational oil companies whose activities leave the land "mortally poisoned" (p.13). Similarly, Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) voices a searing ethical indictment of environmental destruction, asking of those who "fritter the forest and harry the hills," "Are they of this earth / Who live that earth may die?" (p. 45). In "Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder," he further insists that the earth is "ours to work not to waste… ours to plough, not to plunder" (p.49). Although Felstiner (2009), in his book titled *Can Poetry Save the*

Earth? questions poetry's ability to effect concrete environmental change, he maintains that it nonetheless cultivates ecological consciousness and public engagement. This insight aligns with the interventions of Nigerian eco-poets whose extensive and influential output has drawn sustained eco-critical attention.

By contrast, Nigerian eco-fiction remains comparatively sparse, with only a modest and still-developing body of literary works that engage explicitly with environmental themes as their central concern. While earlier Nigerian novels occasionally register environmental motifs, such as the disrupted relationship between humans and land in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, these texts are not primarily structured around ecological advocacy or environmental preservation. As Wu observes, such works tend to reflect pre-industrial or early colonial ecological conditions rather than the intensified, industrial-scale environmental crises that have come to define contemporary Nigeria. The escalation of ecological degradation, particularly in relation to oil extraction in the Niger Delta has contributed to the emergence of a more explicitly eco-conscious literary mode in recent Nigerian fiction. In this regard, contemporary writers such as Helon Habila represent a significant turning point in the trajectory of Nigerian environmental writing. His literary vision is deeply shaped by the socio-environmental realities of his national context, particularly the entanglement of resource exploitation, militarization, and community displacement. Critics therefore argue that *Oil on Water* marks a decisive shift toward fiction that directly confronts the socio-political and ecological violence produced by extractive economies (Adedimeji, 2021; Nnadi, 2020).

Within this emerging framework, narrative fiction becomes more than a reflective medium that serves as a critical space for articulating environmental injustice and rendering visible the lived experiences often excluded from official or journalistic accounts. As Ejiodu and Ekpensi (2014) contend, the "fight to save the earth" is not limited to scientific or policy interventions alone but also requires the imaginative participation of writers who can expand public understanding through narrative representation. By depicting the embodied realities of environmental degradation, fiction contributes to a broader eco-critical awareness, making perceptible the human and nonhuman costs of ecological destruction.

This trend resonates with broader global concerns. Ghosh (2005) remarks on the "petrofiction barrenness" noting that "very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter" (p.75), thus underscoring a striking silence within world literature. Yet, some significant works do exist such as Abdul-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, and Richard T. Kelly's *The Black Eden* examine the entanglements of oil, power, and ecological loss. Together with Habila's novel, these works exemplify what Ghosh describes as "a new phase in nature writing," one that according to Felstiner (2009), offers "a literature-based path toward a deeper understanding of nature's role in human life" (p.79). Within this continuum, *Oil on Water* distinguishes itself not only through its thematic concerns but through its narrative

strategy. Unlike eco-fiction that relies primarily on descriptive realism, Habila structures his novel around a journalistic investigation thereby foregrounding narrative form as central to ecological critique. Employing an investigative frame that is fragmented, uncertain and recursive, mirrors the instability of the Niger Delta itself and transforms the novel into a mode of literary reportage. Through this hybrid form, *Oil on Water* functions simultaneously as ethical witnessing, environmental documentation, and political resistance. In doing so, it moves Nigeria's eco-literary tradition into new terrain that demonstrates the capacity of fiction to interrogate ecological devastation and articulate the human stakes of petro-modernity.

Oil on Water: Fiction, Reportage and the Witnessing Gaze

In his novel, Habila moves beyond the socio-cultural narratives typical of much Nigerian fiction to offer a compelling portrayal of environmental destruction and national security threats that have displaced countless communities. The narrative follows Rufus, a young and ambitious journalist, and Zaq, a once-renowned but now disillusioned reporter, as they navigate the creeks of the Niger Delta in search of Isabel Floode, the kidnapped wife of a British oil worker. Isabel's initial abduction, orchestrated by herself and her driver Solomon as revenge for her husband James's marital betrayal, spirals beyond their control when militants seize her as a bargaining instrument in the region's ongoing resource conflict.

While the plot adopts a conventional quest structure, it is shaped by investigative logic: shifting testimonies, interviews, narrative gaps and the unpredictability of field reporting. Rufus's perspective, observational and often conflicted, mirrors the conventions of reportage. The novel's fragmented episodic structure reproduces the texture of journalistic inquiry where meaning emerges gradually from incomplete and often unreliable evidence. This instability of information within the narrative appears to be a deliberate strategy that reflects the compromised conditions under which Niger Delta journalism operates. As Moore (2014) argues, in contexts marked by ecological devastation and political violence, reportage often becomes a practice of bearing witness under constraint. Truth is not transparently available but must be assembled through fragments, absences and competing accounts. *Oil on Water* enacts this condition: stories remain unverified, informants disappear, and testimonies dissolve into uncertainty, underscoring the fragility of knowledge production in crisis zones where both information and human lives are precarious.

This dynamic also resonates with Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence which describes environmental harm as gradual, dispersed and resistant to immediate or spectacular representation. In *Oil on Water*, journalism simultaneously exposes and fails; it records evidence of ecological destruction yet cannot fully arrest, resolve or render it stable within narrative form. The persistent deferral of resolution reflects the slow, cumulative devastation of oil extraction across the Niger Delta which unfolds

beyond the limits of conventional narrative closure. The novel thus interrogates the epistemological and ethical limits of reportage itself. It represents journalism as both necessary and insufficient: a mode that reveals ecological catastrophe while also exposing the difficulty of fully capturing its unfolding reality.

Habila's engagement with journalistic form in this manner reflects broader insights from petrofiction studies. Scholars such as LeMenager (2014) argue that oil economies generate narrative opacity because their infrastructures are concealed, their violence delayed, and their operations shielded by political and corporate power. In *Oil on Water*, the journalists' movement through militarized zones, corporate secrecy, and inaccessible terrain reveals how petro-capitalism obstructs the conditions necessary for truth-telling. Journalistic form thus becomes a critical instrument for exposing the political economy that shapes environmental knowledge. Within African literary discourse, this novel also aligns with what Adesanmi (2010) conceptualizes as postcolonial testimonial aesthetics where narrative emerges from the imperative to document and contest conditions of injustice. By appropriating the tools of journalism, interviews, field notes, and investigative pursuit, Habila constructs a narrative that maps the ecology of harm distributed across human and nonhuman domains. This approach resonates with Huggan and Tiffin (2010) who emphasize the need for narrative strategies capable of representing complex, multispecies forms of environmental injustice.

Set against a landscape scarred by oil spills, gas flaring, socio-political conflict, and pervasive human suffering, *Oil on Water* examines the deep interconnections between ecocide and social life, offering an unflinching portrayal of a region subjected to decades of environmental degradation. Through its vivid descriptions of poisoned waters, ruined farmlands, and communities living under the constant threat of explosion or contamination, the novel reveals that Nigeria's status as a major oil-producing nation has come at immense ecological and human cost. Toxic pollution has destroyed ecosystems, endangered public health, and eroded traditional livelihoods; in turn, these losses have intensified deprivation, social marginalization, and local resistance. This condition aligns with Hall's theorization of *environmental insecurity* in which extractive industries, particularly transnational oil corporations, operate through exploitative practices that destabilize local environments while deepening structural inequalities. Such insecurity is compounded by the insurgent actions of militant groups, themselves products of long-standing disenfranchisement, economic exclusion and political neglect. Habila's narrative foregrounds this mutually reinforcing cycle of exploitation and insurgency, showing how environmental harm and socio-political unrest feed into one another producing enduring trauma that shapes both landscape and community.

As mentioned earlier, the novel's representation of persistent ecological damage also resonates with Nixon's concept of *slow violence* which describes environmental harm as incremental, accretive and often imperceptible in the moment, yet devastating in its

long-term effects. In *Oil on Water*, devastation unfolds gradually depictions of polluted rivers, dying vegetation, contaminated air, and the quiet disappearance of animal and human life. These cumulative processes of harm rarely produce spectacular events but they erode the conditions necessary for survival and dignity. By portraying this gradual attrition, Habila renders visible a form of violence that typically escapes public attention and resists conventional modes of representation.

Contemporary Nigerian media frequently report on the violence, pollution, and infrastructural decay in the Niger Delta but such coverage is episodic, constrained by deadlines, editorial priorities and public fatigue. As Simpson and Coté (2006) note, journalists confronting overwhelming violence often struggle to create meaning from an overburden of victims and crimes. However, Habila's journalistic experience shapes his narrative strategy as the act of embedding Rufus and Zaq within the devastated landscape allows him to recreate the field experience of reporters while simultaneously highlighting the limitations of conventional journalism. Fiction, in turn, extends the temporality of witnessing, transforming fleeting reports into sustained moral and ethical engagement with the crisis. Thus, *Oil on Water* does more than represent the Niger Delta crisis; it reframes how the crisis can be known. In this instance, journalism provides the scaffolding while fiction provides the depth producing a narrative that both documents ecological catastrophe and invites readers into its ethical and human dimensions.

Narrative Technique as Ecological Witnessing

In *Oil on Water*, environmental descriptions of blackened mangroves, floating corpses of birds, poisoned wells, abandoned villages and oil-slicked waterways extend beyond mere setting to become evidence that is interpreted through Rufus's investigative gaze. Such passages in the novel function like photographic snapshots or field notes that portray the landscape as both victim and witness thus enabling Habila's hybrid journalistic-literary form to perform multiple critical functions. The reportage tone establishes authenticity and a compelling sense of "being there," while eyewitness descriptions bridge the distance between observer and crisis generating moral urgency. The fragmented structure of Rufus's reporting mirrors the instability of life in the Delta while the multiplicity inherent in journalistic inquiry by way of interviews, testimonies and shifting perspectives produces a narrative that captures diverse human and ecological experiences. Here, narrative form becomes political. By refusing closure, by refusing to present a single coherent account, Habila dramatizes the limits of representing ecological catastrophe within conventional narrative or journalistic forms. In this manner, he skillfully stages environmental devastation not as static backdrop but as evidence to be gathered, questioned, and witnessed as done in investigative journalism while at the same time articulating the protracted nature of slow violence, the accumulated generational trauma, and the normalization of suffering.

Graphic depictions found in the novel immerse readers in the region's ecological crisis as Rufus observes, "Soon we were in a dense mangrove; the water underneath us turned foul and sulfurous; insects rose from the surface in swarms to settle in a mobile cloud above us… dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (Habila 8), and later, "The same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench…The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands" (p.9). Such scenes resonate with the apocalyptic imagery characteristic of contemporary eco-fiction. Evocative descriptions of blackened mangroves, floating bird carcasses, poisoned wells and abandoned villages function not simply as atmospheric detail but as reportage sharpened by literary technique. Through such scenes, the novel transforms environmental observation into a form of investigative witnessing, amplifying the documentary force of journalism through the imaginative capacities of fiction.

Seen through the investigative gaze of Rufus, the landscape becomes evidence, material testimony to a deepening ecological crisis. These depictions extend beyond visual shock as they point to the socio-political, economic and ethical dimensions of ecological conflict to expose the catastrophic consequences of environmental degradation. By depicting rivers, mangroves, and villages as wounded yet vocal presences, Habila positions the environment not just as backdrop but as a destabilized character with agency reflecting Buell's assertion that eco-literature implicates human society in environmental ruin. In a similar vein, Hand (2021) observes that nature in *Oil on Water* "strikes back" through Habila's prose, emerging as a wounded yet assertive presence that resists erasure (Hand, 2021).The narrative's attention to ecological detail underscores the long-term consequences of oil exploitation while revealing the interplay of human suffering, corporate impunity, and militant violence. By integrating journalistic investigation with fictional storytelling, Habila is able to expand the temporal and ethical scope of witnessing allowing readers to experience ecological catastrophe as both immediate and cumulative. This produces a dynamic synthesis of fact and imagination that offers a multidimensional understanding of the Niger Delta crisis (Obi 2010; Adegoke2014). In this way, the novel dramatizes the human and ecological costs of oil extraction while transforming fleeting reportage into a sustained moral engagement epspecially as the devastation of land and water extends beyond their physical state, profoundly affecting the communities that depend on them. Rivers, farmlands, and forests may bear the visible scars of spills and pollution, but the social, economic and psychological toll on local communities is equally profound.

The destruction of natural resources undermines traditional livelihoods, displaces populations and erodes cultural practices, leaving the people besieged on multiple fronts. In *Oil on Water*, Habila makes these human consequences of ecocide visible by tracing how environmental degradation transforms not only the land but the social

fabric, health and sense of belonging of Delta communities. The experiences of certain characters, Boma, Dagogo Mark, Chief Ibiram and others illustrate that the slow violence of ecological collapse is inseparable from the trauma and dispossession endured by those who live within its reach. This human toll is vividly portrayed in individual experiences such as that of Boma, Rufus's sister, whose face is disfigured by an oil explosion. She embodies personal and physical loss, yet, she is not an isolated case. The novel presents a population whose bodies, livelihoods and mental well-being have been compromised by the structural violence of the oil industry. The metaphor in the novel's title, oil and water, two elements that do not naturally mix, symbolizes the deep societal dissonance and ecological disruption that imperil the survival of the Delta's inhabitants. The consequences of environmental destruction are vividly conveyed through Dagogo Mark, a doctor who bears witness to the ongoing toll on human life. Despite documenting toxins in blood samples and alerting governments and international organizations, little is done to intervene. He observes:

"Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear… More people fell sick, a lot died… I was their doctor, I should have done more than I did." (p.93)

Mark's despair extends to the pervasive, often invisible progression of disease and injury linked to ecological contamination:

"…a man suddenly comes down with a mild headache… then develops rashes, and suddenly a vital organ shuts down. And those whom the disease doesn't kill, the violence did… there's more need for grave diggers than for a doctor." (p.93)

The collective dispossession of communities is further illustrated in the story of Chief Ibiram's riverside village which has been ravaged by oil spills, military incursions and militant activity. Once a thriving, self-sufficient settlement, the village is forced into repeated displacement as ecological degradation, corporate exploitation, and internal divisions erode social cohesion:

"…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." (40)

The villagers' loss extends beyond material deprivation to include the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices and their intimate relationship with the land. Fishermen, once sustained by the river, now navigate polluted waters, existing as "a community of ghosts" alienated from the environment that once nurtured them. In this sense, the Delta communities become emblematic of the human cost of slow, cumulative environmental harm, a place where ecological damage unfolds gradually with minimal accountability. For these populations, extreme poverty, marginalization and ecological degradation are intertwined, prompting some communities to adopt militancy, sabotage or illegal oil siphoning as desperate strategies for demanding recognition and justice. Habila's narrative thus positions the human consequences of ecocide at the center of the Delta's story, showing how environmental destruction is inseparable from social dislocation, psychological trauma, and the erosion of cultural

and economic life. The Delta's people are not merely victims of ecological collapse; they are witnesses, survivors and agents negotiating survival in the face of relentless environmental and social violence.

Conclusion

By adopting, reworking, and ultimately destabilizing the conventions of narrative journalism, *Oil on Water* demonstrates how journalistic form can function as an eco-critical method rather than merely a mode of representation. The novel appropriates techniques associated with reportage that is, investigative pursuit, witness testimony, documentary detail, and scene-based reconstruction only to expose their inherent limitations when confronted with the scale and opacity of ecological devastation. In doing so, it foregrounds the idea that neither journalism nor fiction alone is sufficient to fully register the complexity of ecocide. Journalism, constrained by evidentiary demands and institutional pressures toward verification, often fragments or defers meaning. On the other hand, Fiction, though formally expansive, can risk romanticising environmental harm or holding it at a critical distance. Their convergence in Habila's narrative therefore produces a hybrid form of literary reportage that is capable of capturing both the material realities of environmental catastrophe and the epistemological conditions through which such realities are mediated, obscured, or made legible.

This hybrid mode draws attention to the politics of knowledge production in contexts of extractive violence. Information about ecological destruction in the Niger Delta is shown to be partial, contested, and unevenly distributed, shaped by power relations that determine who can speak, who can document, and who can be believed. As a result, the narrative does not present environmental truth as stable or fully recoverable, instead, it stages truth as something assembled through fragments, competing accounts, and ethical uncertainty. In this sense, the novel not only represents ecocide but also interrogates the systems of narration, witnessing, and authority through which ecocide is understood.Through this formal strategy, *Oil on Water* extends the argument for narratives that link ecological awareness with broader structures of social and political accountability. It aligns ecological crisis with questions of justice, representation, and power, insisting that environmental degradation cannot be separated from the economic and political systems that produce it. In doing so, it affirms literature's capacity to function as both a critical and reflective medium, one that documents environmental harm while simultaneously questioning the ways in which such harm is narrated, interpreted, and rendered intelligible.

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