

*The City in Crisis: Terrorism and Kidnapping in
Helon Habila's Oil on Water*

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Abstract

The spate of terrorism and kidnapping has become a global concern in the twenty-first century. These social vices and their corollaries have dramatically increased as preferred tactics of militants. This happens anytime and anywhere, and no community, city or country is immune from these threatening phenomena. This paper seeks to use Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* to delineate the perilous issue of terrorism and kidnapping apparent in the oil producing Niger-Delta region - and Nigeria by extension- where these apprehensions have become a misnomer. Consequently, Habila's *Oil on Water* is a cultural alternative on the role of Literature to provide an imaginative opening in addressing hostage taking and disquiet in the Nigerian social space. The novel of study illustrates the air of truth through which a literary work becomes a speaking entity in the actual world. The writer suggests that the rising rate of poverty, hunger, corruption, underdevelopment, environmental despoliation, violence and marginalization of dispossessed people have brought about the surge of kidnapping in Nigeria. Thus, terrorism and kidnapping constitute a crisis that demands urgent political, personal, legislative and sustainable actions. The paper utilizes New Historicism as a theoretical site to appraise the concerns under study.

Introduction

Terrorism and kidnapping are part of the saddest illegalities going on in the world today. Before now, terrorism and kidnapping were often perceived as western narratives which could never berth on the Nigerian shores due to Nigeria's compelling cultural and religious background. However, the persistent repressive government policies suffered by subjugated people brought about diverse facets of terrorist acts and an unprecedented moment in Nigerian history. This has

gone messy with the Niger Delta militants as perpetrators in the South, the Boko Haram (“Western education is sinful”) in the North-East, a rising band of kidnappers in the South-East along with desperate cattle herdsman with sophisticated arms in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The situation is so critical that it affects the young and the old, the rich and the poor, and the domestic and international communities.

Delineations of Terrorism and Kidnapping

Various definitions of terrorism abound; however, “Terrorism” has been described by the United States Department of Defence:

as both a tactic and strategy; a crime and a holy duty, a justified reaction to oppression and an excusable abomination. Terrorism is the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of violence to inculcate fear.... This is intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuits of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological... (www. Secbrief.org).

“Kidnapping” is the taking away of a person by force, threat, or deceit with the intent to detain that person against his or her consent kidnapping may be carried out by holding a person in false imprisonment or illegal detention or confinement. Kidnapping may be organized for ransom (economic reasons) or for political or other purposes. Militants commit acts of violence that draw the attention of government, populace, and the world to their cause. They plan their attack to obtain the greatest publicity- choosing targets that symbolize what they oppose. Suffice it to say that terrorist acts are triggered by various forms of oppression, real or perceived, that allow the culprits to rationalize their actions.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the contemporary issues of kidnapping and their corollaries in the Niger-Delta region using Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. The novel chronicles the gripping details of terrorism, neglect, and the fight for justice using the Niger-Delta space as a microcosm of the postcolonial Nigerian condition. Abdu Pinado in an interview with Helon Habila writes that “the Niger Delta is an interesting place... it is a place that is unique to Nigeria because of the kidnappings and violence. We never had anything like that in Nigeria before. It was shocking to Nigerians that this was happening... Now we see it everywhere... It started as a protest of the environmental pollution but then it became a business...” (www.allafrica.com). By portraying contemporary Nigerian concerns, Helon Habila sensitizes readers on the criminal

nature of hostage-taking alongside the fear, mistrust, psychological trauma, and devastation that shroud people and societies in many cities in Nigeria.

The Niger-Delta region, the hub of Nigeria's oil wealth, has been the vista of protest in opposition to the repressive tendencies of the Nigerian state on the one hand and against the exploitative and environmentally unfriendly activities of oil multinationals on the other. The violence has taken terror dimensions as the Niger-Delta militants, due to several dashed hopes, resort to hostage taking, bombing of oil installations, pipeline vandalization, piracy, youth restiveness and bunkering as means to prosecute their cause. The habit of terror tactics, hapless killings, and destruction of properties to address agitations have raised apprehensions pertaining to national security in Nigeria.

Helon Habila's Oil on Water

Helon Habila was born in 1967 to the Tangale family in Kaltungo Gombe State. He has written outstanding works like *Waiting for an Angel* (2000), *Measuring Time* (2007), *Oil on Water* (2010), and *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings* (2016). Habila's *Oil on Water* gives voice to the crises of kidnapping, terrorism, and the Nigerian government and multinational corporations' complicated involvement. For some critics, Helon Habila, who hails from the northern part of Nigeria, may not have captured the issues of kidnapping and other critical issues in the Niger Delta region in their totality since he is not a native of the region, and was resident abroad at the period the text was authored. It is pertinent to state that, Helon Habila, though a northern extraction from Nigeria, is an artist, visionary, and nationalist writer that rises above ethnic concerns to capture thematic concerns of national and global interest. To uphold this, Johnson Dul explains:

an artist's work is compelled by a desire to drive a cause- a conscious decision to create a functional work. As a real artist, he transcends the boundaries that separate ethnic groups...and contribute to nation building.... Writers make choices. It is the writer who holds the mirror and chooses on what and how to point it...They pursue a national cause, seeing themselves as the eyes and mouth piece of the society, its watch dogs (7-13).

So, whether as a writer in the diaspora or in Nigeria and a non-Delta indigene, Helon Habila is a nationalist whose creative piece *Oil on Water* achieves the status of a national literature. By this,

“national literatures are the expressions of writers feeling of a sense of nationhood and a sense of belonging...” (Dul 13).

Oil on Water conveys the extent to which oil resources have generated immense profits for the Nigerian government, the privileged few and multinational corporations, but have triggered untold hardship and complex side effects for the oil producing communities, their inhabitants, and landscapes”. Kimiebi Ebienu states that “the unbated marginalization, disempowerment, segregation, suppression and repression of hitherto peaceful agitations by Niger-Delta and the Nigerian state have made aggressive oil agitations inevitable hence the radical activities that characterize the region” (637- 43). Tanure Ojaide writes that, “... whatever happens in the Niger-Delta is part of the entire conflict, misunderstanding, and mistreatment of the people that is going on in the entire African world and elsewhere which has been and is still giving rise to imaginative literature” (37). Little wonder, the affected communities’ express grief over years of neglect and environmental degradation that have polluted fishing streams and fresh water sources, poisoned land through spills, blowouts, and decades of gas flaring which have culminated into violent armed conflicts which threaten governance, economic performance, national security, and the harmony of Nigeria.

A rundown of the novel *Oil on Water* captures Rufus, a young Nigerian journalist on a mission with Zaq, his mentor and once famous journalist. They are pursuing the story - to find a kidnapped British woman, the wife to an oil executive held hostage by militants. The precarious investigation takes them deep into the interior of the Delta riverine area. The journey unveils intricate perceptions of Nigeria’s socio-political menaces and other unintended outcomes. In the light of these, the role of Literature in explicating prevalent happenings in society cannot be over emphasized. Literature raises awareness about the individual and the society by exposing the realities and salient issues which the citizenries are ignorant about. Steve Ogunpitan claims that “the literature of an age replicates the prevalent social realities and the general happenings in the society in which it operates. A literature that is properly written will provide a clear account of things that have happened and details that people can glean from” (26). Therefore, the representations of contemporary realities of kidnapping in Habila’s *Oil on Water* illustrates the existing status quo in Nigeria, and validates the use of new historicism- a theoretical approach to literature which concentrates on how events, places, history, and culture within a society affect a written work.

New Historicism as Theoretical Tool

New Historicism is a theory proposed by Stephen Greenblatt in the twentieth-century. It explores a written work as a nexus through which diverse social, historical, and political currents circulate. For Bressler Charles “an intricate connection exists between an aesthetic object, a text or any work of art and society... All texts must be analysed in their cultural context and not in isolation” (188). In other words, one must know the societal concerns of the author, the historical times evidenced in the work, and other cultural elements exhibited in the text before one can devise a valid interpretation.

Corroborating, Giddens Anthony avers that a text must be interpreted in its social, historical, cultural, and political contexts to grasp the meanings of a text as they might have been understood by those who produced it... this involves investigating the conditions of their knowledge ability (529-30). For Sussanne Wiedenmann: “new historicism reveals power relations that are reflected but hidden in a text. She opines that all texts are considered as products of certain historical conditions therefore imbued with cultural, political, and social elements” (3). The aim of new historicism is to scrutinize how literature contributes to, replicates or challenges other cultural discourses of the same period. Advocates of new historicism believe that themes and characterization developed in any text are those which are common in that given society in each period. Some of the proponents of new historicism are Stephen Greenblatt, Michael Foucault, Clifford Geertz, and Catherine Gallagher and they raised the following vital principles of New historicism:

- i) Literary and other cultural texts are connected in complex ways to the period in which they were created.
- ii) Mundane activities and the conditions of daily life can tell us much about the belief systems of a time.
- iii) Text can have multiple meaning.
- iv) Reading of texts provide insight into the complexity of human thought and experience. (www.literariness.org).

Bearing these in mind, Helon Habila’s selected text from a new historicist perspective describes the interplay of complicated prevailing social, historical, cultural conditions and ideas affecting Nigeria’s nationhood. This is palpable in the novel, *Oil on Water* as the author gives vivid

account of contemporary critical realities of the tragedy that has become the Niger-Delta and Nigeria at large since the discovery of oil. For Stephen Greenblatt, “the novel form among all genres of literature is particularly sensitive to the diverse ways in which individuals come to terms with the governing patterns of culture. This is apparent due to the spatial advantages which fiction has over other genres like drama and poetry in its representation of reality” (qtd. in Payne 15).

Furthermore, in line with new historicism principles, *Oil on Water* as a primary text registers the rumblings of the past and present. The writer, through literary journalism-a stylistic strategy of factual reporting - captures real people and events. For Richard Nordquist:

an essential element of literary journalism is its focus. Rather than emphasizing institutions, literary journalism explores the lives of those who are affected by those institutions...characterized by reporting, focusing on ordinary people and accuracy. Through the stories and sketches, authors make a statement or provide an interpretation, about the people and culture depicted” (www.thoughtCo.com).

The style of observing, recording, writing, and reporting in the novel demonstrates the urgency to make visible the grim happenings in the despoiled Niger Delta landscape and Nigeria at large as mentioned in the novel:

... But I couldn't turn my face away for long. I was a journalist: my job was to observe and to write about it later. To be a witness for posterity. I witnessed the stoic and anticipatory posture of the kneeling men. I witnessed the brutal anointing in silence, smelled the reek of petrol hanging in the air, pungent, and I wondered how the men could stand it. Already I felt sick and dizzy from the fumes... (*Oil on Water*, 55).

As follows, in communities and a world ravaged by socio-political travails, it is the writer's duty according to Tanure Ojaide in *Contemporary African Literature: New Approaches*:

... to sensitize the public... for peace and harmony in our respective communities, societies, and the entire world. There should be the promotion of human rights. Majority populations should be sensitive to the feelings of minorities as the powerful should do towards the weak, the rich to the poor, and there should be fairness and justice and avoiding of exploitation and oppression of all kinds (xi-xii).

Furthermore, in consistence with new historicism, *Oil on Water* could be analysed to have multiple meanings. To serve this end, Helon Habila raises consciousness about myriad social

injustices by portraying the actualities in cities and places in Nigeria. He captures Lagos, Port Harcourt, locales, and creeks in *Oil on Water* to delineate the chaotic contradictions, class inequality, and brutal dispossession in these dwellings as hopes for employment, opportunities, and basic social amenities have been shattered. The text of study shows how the Nigerian government label dominated groups who react to the veracities of poor governance, corruption, disillusionment, poverty, injustices, and forms of oppression as threats to national well-being. While, the dominated groups employ forms of resistance to express “their frustrations...their direct and personal cultural clashes within the conquering culture... their fears, hopes and dreams about the future and their own identities” (Bressler 187). Overall, New historicism exposes power structures and complex social, cultural turbulences associated with imposed exploitation and industrialization.

Kidnapping and Terrorism in Oil on Water

For decades, the Niger-Delta has been optimistic that the discovery of oil in her region would translate to basic amenities such as steady power supply, health care facilities, good roads, schools and employment opportunities for the region. On the contrary, a deadly ecological pollution is congesting Niger-Delta's vast ecosystem. This is demoralizing for the youths and the aged whose hopes for essential amenities from the Federal government and multinational companies have been a mirage. Again, this agrees with the principles of new historicism which states that “literary and other cultural texts are connected in complex ways to the period in which they were created”. By this, the process of textual analysis reveals not just the social world of a text but also the present-day forces working on the reader as he negotiates the meaning of a text. Therefore, *Oil on Water* uncovers Nigeria's postcolonial disorder, insecurity and the era of war on terror ignited by predictable consequences of marginalization, dispossession, alienation and social-political corruption/carnages. The novel reveals the various intertwined forms through which oil resources have become forms of affluence for government, oil workers, multinational corporations while, it becomes forms of obliteration for the indigenous people in the Delta enclave who are often “told by the oil companies and the government that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future ...” (97).

It is apparent, that oil resources have brought nothing to the people's ecosystem and their life support as the narrator laments the outcome of modern-day destructive expansion and development continuing in the Niger Delta:

... 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, biting our arms and faces and ears.... The atmosphere grew heavily with suspended stench of dead matter. We followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots (*Oil on Water*, 8).

The quotation affirms the annihilation that oil as a commodity has brought on the flora, fauna, farm lands and sources of livelihood for the Niger-Delta dwellers. This affirms new historicism's stance that "mundane activities and the conditions of daily life can tell us much about the belief systems of a time". As *Oil on Water* encapsulates the overlapping ways the materiality of oil has impacted on the cultural and social lives of the Niger-Delta inhabitants. The text of study attends "carefully to the material and symbolic terrains on which youth's armed resistance against the oil industry and the Nigerian state apparatus play out... The accounts of the Niger Delta point to common ways in which oil manifests itself materially in the making and contestations of ways of life- clouds, rain, soil, skin and bodies as much as in gas tanks or bank accounts... In the midst of this historically volatile, disconnected oil producing technological zone – a zone that intensifies agency... with unpredictable and dynamic effects" (Appel, Mason, and Watts 66 -73). The narrator recounts how the militant nicknamed 'Professor' gives the rationale for the terror in the region:

Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence every day. Tell them how we are hounded daily in our own land. Where do they want us to go, tell me, where? Tell them we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us. That is the truth, remember that... (*Oil on Water*, 221).

The excerpt demonstrates how literary characters cannot shy away from their troubling past. The excerpt illuminates the prolong disconnect underscored by Niger-Delta youths who are despondent, and yearning for a sense of inclusion. Their incessant struggle for self-determination and a fair share of oil profits. The Niger-Delta youths are mindful of the fact that they "have not only lost the

rights to their lands but that those lands are defiled by oil spills and gas flares, making aquaculture and agriculture nearly impossible..." (Appel, Mason, and Watts 75). As oil wealth from the Delta seeps back into the hands of armed militants in the Niger-Delta who assume themselves as freedom fighters, revolutionaries, legitimate combatants fighting for what they believe in by whatever means possible against the impoverishment of the Niger-Delta inhabitants and sources of livelihood. They are "fighting on several fronts- against the oil complex, the Ijaw gerontocracy, and often against one another as they battle for territory and position... In an unending construct, young Ijaw men have become fatalists in the hunt for place, acceptance, and allegiance as the whole yet fragmented social body of Ijawland is heaved into chaos by the oil wars" (Appel, Mason, and Watts 76). Therefore, a historical understanding of literary personalities past and present in *Oil on Water* facilitates a reader to comprehend their actions and inactions relating to their crooked experiences. This indicates why the repressed youths explicitly assert their decision to resist the authorities through whatever means available.

For Augustine Ikelegbe "...The present violent confrontations epitomized by rising radicalization and militancy for resource control shows the Nigerian state and oil companies' insensitivity to the plight of the people..." (5-6). Don Okereke also asserts that "the wanton insecurity, criminality, kidnapping, instability, and terrorism currently ravaging Nigeria are symptomatic of a dysfunctional society and a failing state. Abysmal poverty, hopelessness, joblessness, frustration, unprecedented levels of corruption, arrogance of power, complacent and retroactive security agencies, lackadaisical and corrupt judiciary, porous borders, covert foreign interests have... effect on the unparalleled levels of crimes, insecurity, instability, and terrorism currently bedeviling Nigeria. There is also a crude oil, radical religion-cultural angle to the mix" (www.scribd.org). It is obvious that, contemporary terrorism in Nigeria is a latent function of prolonged failure of the Nigerian state to deliver purposeful good governance. This is apparent when the Federal, State, and local government representatives' appropriate monies allocated to basic amenities, funding of schools, hospitals, and industries while the greater percentage of the public-especially the youths - are denied good education, employment, and good health.

The nonchalant attitude of government and oil corporations about the predicament in the Niger delta region has produced armed militants who have altered the genuine fight for socio-economic and political justice to kidnapping of foreigners and indigenous workers for self-accumulation, and power. From new historicist perspective literary critics assert that to appreciate a text, it must be

put within the historical context of its production. In this regard, the narrator in *Oil on Water* gives the reason for their search: “I asked myself if going in search of the kidnapped British woman... was wise after all. This was our ninth day on her trail... oil company worker, British, petroleum engineer, his wife had gone out by herself and she never came back, believed to have been kidnapped by the militants” (3). The novel details how the kidnapped British woman, Isabel Floode, was first abducted by her driver Salomon, in alliance with his neighbour Bassey and Jamabo, a police officer, to settle a personal score against his boss who impregnated his wife to be. The abduction plan gets out of hand, after some armed kidnappers led by ‘Professor’ demand a ransom of five million for the kidnapped British woman.

Helon Habila divulges the names and activities of the various militants. This brings to light the author’s attitude and prejudice about kidnapping during a milieu in Nigeria. The narrator states: “...so far, we’ve had over a dozen ransom demands by different groups: The Black Belts of Justice, the Free Delta Army and the AK- 47 Freedom Fighters” (*Oil on Water*, 31). The different groups of Niger Delta militants such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Avengers, Niger Delta Greenland Mandate, Asawana Deadly Force of Niger Delta, Niger Delta Revolutionary Crusaders among many others, are the most noticeable who kidnap oil company workers, and attack oil installations to press home their points. In addition, through the characters, Rufus and Zak, the author reveals the deeper problem that kidnapping generates in Nigeria and the global community:

...Tell me Rufus, my friend, what do we seek? It wasn’t a question, but I answered any way, -the woman, and the Professor.

-I said ‘what’, not ‘whom’. Forget the woman and her kidnappers for a moment. What we really seek is not them but a greater meaning. Remember, the story is not the final goal. - Then what is? – The meaning of the story, and only a few ever discover that... (*Oil on Water*, 4).

In drawing attention to the concern of kidnapping and terrorism, Habila seems to suggest that there is a correlation between issues of unsustainable consumerism, exploitation of natural resources, underdevelopment, alienation, contamination and devastation of indigenous people’s fauna and flora for profit and power. This has put Nigeria’s economic development and national security to task. It is against this backdrop, that young people desert their localities for the city to make a better living as the narrator explains:

...He wants us to take the boy with us when we go back to Port Harcourt... but see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that. Na good boy. I swear... (*Oil on Water*, 36).

The above quotation foregrounds new historicism principle of “reading of texts which provides insight into the complexity of human thoughts and experience”. The novel bemoans the state of lawlessness, where dangerous weapons, and arms proliferation is the order where dangerous weapons, and the culture of hard work is eroded- thereby fostering extortion. The novel also reveals that the deployment of force by the military to quell terrorist activities aggravates the situation inflamed by military viciousness, invasion and destruction as the narrator makes clear:

The Major looked up...when he finished speaking his face had a satisfied grin. Be prepared for what you are about to see. Irikefe is now mostly ashes and rubble, bombed by the gun helicopter over there. Not a hut is left standing... What of the people? Most of them would still be there, I suppose. But expect a lot of casualties, unavoidable of course. This is a war zone...look, look you can see the smoke from here...the fighting was over when we got off the boat, but the earth was still smoldering with the remains of battle, the huts still gave out smoke, and soldiers still fired sporadically into the air as they corralled the villagers into one big clearing, trying to determine who among them was a militant and who wasn't. I couldn't recognize the hut where we once slept... (*Oil on Water*, 157).

The carnage that pervades the Niger-Delta and the manner ordinary citizens are caught up in the anxieties between the military and the militants who have taken up arms in reaction to their lot communicates much. By speaking to the minds of readers, the writer presents the traumatized condition of Delta inhabitants and Nigeria by extension where “... communities... 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 34). In this manner, the writer explains that the Nigerian citizens in general have resigned themselves to fate regarding their predicament.

Habila's selected text expounds prevailing issues of contemporary postcolonial Nigerian society exemplified in the portrayal of characters, attitudes, and communities devastated with diverse encounters of which they will forever be transformed as evident among the victims of kidnapping, orphaned/homeless children, and families. Ngugi Wa Thiongo emphasises that: “Literature does not grow in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of

concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society” (xv). This indicates that the function of art is to replicate the socio-economic, political, and historical realities and by so doing, it evokes a certain sensibility, emotion, or impulse to action or opposition in the reader. Habila has been successful in the use of language that is not complicated alongside images that are not obscure to deepen and chronicle modern-day occurrences in the Niger-Delta and Nigeria by extension. In view of these, in the closing part of the novel, Habila seems to be unenthusiastic and cynical as he exposes the aftermath of the complex situation of kidnapping, violence, and terrorism: “when I looked back from the militants, back at chief Ibiram and his people. They were fragile flotilla, ordinary men and women and babies, a puny armada about to launch itself once more into uncertain waters...” (238).

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the critical issues of kidnapping and terrorism noticeable in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. The analysis of the selected text is carried out using new historicism as - a suitable model which underscores the intricate social, cultural, historical, and political problems that perplex Nigerian citizens. *Oil on Water* vividly brings to public attention, the menace of kidnapping as legacies of security unrest in Nigeria as people live lives of fear, apprehension, and suspicion in their relationship with other people and government. The study shows that the disquiet of insecurity is everywhere as journalists, critics, and creative writers such as Habila in *Oil on Water* strive to show the overlapping evil of terrorism, hostage-taking, and violence on the people. The text of study seems to suggest that there must be political, personal, legislative, and sustainable efforts to address the fundamentals of the dispossessed people in the Niger-Delta region and Nigeria by extension. To this end, there should be strict adherence to sustainable environmental standards by the government and multinational oil corporations to create an enabling environment for qualitative education, genuine employment, security, stability, and development in the Nigerian space. Taken together, the novel of study illuminates the air of truth that a literary work is a speaking entity in the actual world.

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