Fishery as Socio-Cultural Symbol: Conceptualising Marine Pollution and the Dynamics of Displacement in Selected Nigerian Novels

Onyekachi Eni
Department of Public and Private Law, Faculty of Law
Alex-Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
Email: onyekachieni@yahoo.com

Chukwu Romanus Nwoma
Department of English and Literary Studies, Alex-Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
Email: nwomaromanus@gmail.com

Abstract Among the three principal domains of the environment: air, land and water, land is most prized by terrestrial people while water is of utmost importance to coastal dwellers. A major consequence of oil pollution is that it deteriorises the marine capital of a fishery community which is vital for its fish economy. Using Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* and Helon Habila's *Oil On Water* as its analytical touchstones, this paper contextualises the consequences of marine oil pollution on occupational fishery activities among Niger-Deltans within the framework of the people's shared aspiration for economic survival and group identity. With ecocriticism as theoretical canvass and interpretive content analysis as methodology, the paper contends that the castration of the fishery livelihood of the delta underpins its environmental degradation with sundry collateral consequences.

Keywords fishery; marine oil pollution; displacement; environment; Culture

Authors **Onyekachi Eni**, Dr., is an interdisciplinary scholar with Ph.D in English and Literary Studies from University of Calabar, and Ph.D in Environmental Law from Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, Nigeria. Until September, 2023, he was the Dean, Faculty of Law, Alex-Ekwueme Federal University, Ikwo, Nigeria. He is a member of the Nigerian Bar Association, Dr. Eni is widely published in several peer-reviewed journals. **Chukwu Romanus Nwoma**, Dr., is Senior Lecturer and

Head of Department of English and Literary Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. He studied English and Literary Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he completed a PhD in 2014. His papers have been published in reputable journals across different continents.

Introduction

One of the telling consequences of oil pollution is that it deteriorises the marine capital of an area, which is vital for the fish economy of fishery communities (Food and Agricultural Organization [(FAO) 11]. Some of the oil-driven environmental factors which injuriously affect fishing activities (such as take place in Nigeria's Niger-Delta)[1] include gas flaring, oil well blowouts, improper disposal of drilling mud, oil spills and pipeline leakages, among others (Sam et al 1323-13244). Oil-induced destruction of the aquatic habitat devalues the productive capacity of most riverine communities traditionally engaged in peasant fish production (Osuagwu and Olaifa 11). This is because it leads to environmental pollution, destruction of the ecosystem, and socio-economic impoverishment of oil producing communities due to the collapse of fish economy (Dawodu 3). Among other ramifications, "the collapsed fish stock may also have great symbolic importance in the community's traditions, mythology, religion, and cultural identity, with its collapse leaving those components severely impoverished …" (FAO 4).

The Niger-Delta region commands global attention being among the ten most important wetlands and marine ecosystems in the world (Kadafa 38). Located in the Atlantic Coast of Southern Nigeria, the Niger-Delta is the second largest delta with a coastline of about 450km which ends at Imo river entrance (Awosika 2). Owing to unsustainable oil exploration activities, the region is classified as one of the five petroleum most severely damaged ecosystems in the world (Kadafa 38). Equally famous for the abundance of fish resources, the Niger-Delta is reputed to have more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa (Okonta and Douglas 63).

Like most commentaries on literary works inspired by the problems of the Niger-Delta, the preponderance of critical opinions on Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* (1993) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2012) have centered on the climate of violence occasioned by oil-induced environmental degradation. They include,

1 Niger Delta is a coastal region in Nigeria which has large oil resources. Oil exploration and related activiries have negatively impacted the environment resulting in the loss of means of livelihood.

Nwanyanwu (2019), Omoko (2018), Iheka (2015), Feghabo (2013) on *Tides,* and Feldner (2018), Edebor (2017), Medovoi (2014) and Auerbach (2014) on *Oil on Water.* Using *Tides* and *Oil on Water* as its analytical touchstones, this paper contextualises the consequences of marine oil pollution on occupational fishery activities among Niger-Deltans within the framework of the people's shared aspiration for economic survival and group identity. With ecocriticism as theoretical canvass and interpretive content analysis as methodology, we argue that the castration of the fishery livelihood of the delta underpins its environmental degradation with sundry collateral consequences. This article is structured into five parts. The first is the introduction which lays out the background, objective and scope of the paper. The second part situates fishery economics within the trajectory of marine oil pollution while the third part locates fishery occupation as an index of cultural expression. The fourth part contextualises marine oil pollution and the people's loss of fishery livelihood as a modality of internal displacement while the final part embodies the conclusion.

Of the three principal domains of the environment: air, land and water, land is most prized by terrestrial people while water is of utmost importance to coastal dwellers (Cordell 301). Ruddle and Akimichi note that "fishermen habitually define, delimit, and defend their rights to fishing grounds or 'sea tenure'"(11) . According to Saro-Wiwa, the importance of water in the economy of Niger-Delta people stems from the fact that "rivers and streams are sources of food and spiritual sustenance of the community" (12-13). Agbogun notes that "it is believed that the waters of this area are cities populated not only by fishes but also a community of deities and water spirits"(3). Historically, prior to the discovery and consequent exploitation of oil in the area, "the Niger-Delta region had been a peaceful place with fishing and farming as the main means of livelihood of its denizens" (Oboreh 18). The despoliation of the delta environment by oil exploration activities has crucial ramifications for fishing activities as the mainstay of riverine communities (Obi and Rustad 3-4). The FAO underlines the multidimensional status of fishery among coastal communities as follows:

> The entire fabric of the community's life [is] shaped by fisheries activities including: social organization, economic organization, political organization, religious organization, community's cultural identity, and cultural self-identity of the community's individual members. (FAO 7)

In *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* Isidore Okpewho and Helon Habila respectively,

thematise the disruption of the fishery economy as a consequence of marine oil pollution and the overall despoliation of the environment. By deploying journalists as "roving reporters," both novelists enable the reader to take a vicarious tour of the Niger-Delta region and to witness the destruction of the fishing livelihood of the people in the wake of environmental devastation. Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* is an epistolary novel set between 25 August 1976 and 28 February 1978. It records the correspondence between two journalists and friends, Piriye Dukumo and Tonwe Brisibe[1] both of Beniotu clan of the Niger-Delta and their encounters with other actors in the novel. Both Piriye and Tonwe were prematurely retired from the state-owned Chronicle Newspaper in what they perceive as an ethnic-oriented retrenchment. Upon his ouster, Tonwe retires to his village in the Delta as a fish farmer while Piriye remains in Lagos as a freelance journalist. Piriye writes a letter to Tonwe exhorting the necessity for a detailed investigation of oil pollution of the delta environment. After his initial reluctance, Tonwe agrees to participate in the project.

Meanwhile, in Lagos, Piriye links up with a radical activist of Niger-Delta extraction, Ebika Harrison (Bickerbug) who launches sustained tirades against the government and the oil companies for the devastation of the Delta Communities. He is arrested by the National Security apprachik and later released after Piriye who was also arrested for associating with him, regains his freedom. At the end of the novel, Bickerbug is rearrested following his bombing of the Kwarafa Dam and several oil installations in the Delta. Tonwe is also arrested for not reporting Bickerbug to the police after Bickerbug and his gang visited him while Piriye's fate hangs in the balance. His pregnant wife Lati is unaccounted for following her journalistic trip to the Delta to cover the destruction of the Kwarafa Dam while Piriye awaits the interrogation of Bickerbug and Tonwe to know whether he will be implicated. The central conflict in the novel is the destruction of the fishery livelihood of the people as an index of the devastation of the environment (Iheka 119).

Similarly, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* details the journeys of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, through the Niger-Delta region. Cast in the quest tradition, the assignment of the journalists is to investigate the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, a British woman and wife of a Petroleum engineer working for an oil company in Nigeria. While Rufus is a young journalist eager to make his mark in the profession, Zaq is a veteran journalist in the evening of his career. Both of them plung into the

1 Piriye and Tonwe are both participant-narrators in the novel. The plot of the novel is structured through the exchange of letters by the two narrators.

natural and social maze of the Niger-Delta region. The storyline of the novel is set in a two-week time frame as the journalists navigate the complex and narrow water channels witnessing the violent battles between the militants and the military force, the serial devastation of the environment by the oil companies, the disruption of the people's fishery livelihood and their attendant displacement from their homesteads. At the end of the novel, Zaq is unable to survive the expedition while Rufus succeeds in finding the kidnapped woman and bearing the ransome demand for her release.

All told, the novel is "a haunting depiction of Niger-Delta's environmental destruction, which is heightened by rhetorical devices such as personification of the landscape as a sick and dying person" (Feldner 2). As the following sections demonstrate, the destruction of the fishery livelihood of Niger-Delta people is both an act of economic deprivation and cultural erosion. This averment is supported by the fact that "fish is a major indicator of environmental contamination, providing evidence of transmission of pollutants in marine ecosystems" (Plessel *et al* 6).

Fishery, Petro-economics and Marine Pollution

In spite of what William Slymaker has characterized as "ecohesitation" to describe what he considers the initial slow response by African literature to ecocritical concerns (133) , the weaponization of literature for the cause of environmental protection has gathered momentum in recent African and Nigerian literary expression (Nwanyanwu 8). Conceptually, the term "ecocriticism" is an intersection between literature and the environment and traceable to William Ruckert who is believed to have first coined it in his 1978 essay: "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (Johnson 7). Over the years, ecocriticism has remained an important component of western ecological thought and the appreciation of the "literature of the environment" (Barry 249). The enunciation of the concept of ecocriticism is motivated by the need to apply "ecological and ideological concepts to the study of literature" because of the importance of ecology to the world (Ruckert 107).

Notwithstanding the diversity of perspectives on it, Glotfelty and Fromm's definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii) has gained global currency. However, Lawrence Buell's conception of ecocriticism "as [the] study of the relationship between literature and the apocalyptic rhetoric" (86) constitute a call to humankind to come to terms with the "sense of urgency about the demise of the world" (Garrard 85). This averment finds resonance in Edebor's contention that the purpose of

ecocriticism is to raise the level of consciousness of humankind on the sustainability of the environment" (44) .

In *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* Okpewho and Habila respectively, interrogate the oil-induced degradation of the Niger-Delta environment and its impact on the people's fishing livelihood. In *Tides,* Piriye introduces the documentation project to Tonwe and makes the point that the oil companies have wrecked the people's source of livelihood because "our people are nothing if not fishermen" (*Tides* 2). Tonwe is swayed to participate in the project by the visit of "a group of fishermen from Ebrima" (11) who seek his assistance to save them from the menace of the oil company (Atlantic Fuels) whose activities "were drawing the fish away" (p. 11) and threatening the people's survival because "their lives depended on fishing, and they faced certain disaster if the schools of fish were forced permanently out of their areas of activity" (11). In spite of "the meager reward which [the] fishermen derive from the craft" (6) on account of oil exploration activities, the oil companies are righteously indignant that the natives have the temerity to complain about "their operations just because a bunch of ignorant fishermen now caught fewer fishes than they were accustomed to" (12). Expectedly, the insensitivity of the oil companies heighten the frustration of the coastal dwellers. According to an illiterate fisherman, Opene: "we fishermen in the creeks have no other source of survival than the fishes. Now, the activities of the oil companies around us are posing a threat to our survival" (29).

Similarly, in *Oil on Water*, we are confronted with the same issues of marine oil pollution and its consequential impact on fishery activities and the survival of the coastal people. The narrator, Rufus, offers an evocative description of the decadent landscape and the impact of oil on the aquatic ecology:

> 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 tops… [and] in the next village […] something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. (8)

To underscore the linkage between fishery occupation and the survival of the people, the narrator reveals the people's anxiety over "the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water and how they might have to move to a place where the fishing was still fairly good" (16). The destructive impact of oil pollution on the fishery livelihood of the people accounts for the refusal of a nearby village

head, Chief Malabo, to welcome the oil companies to his domain because in the places where the oil companies were already operating, "their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines" (40). The foregoing illustrations from *Tides* and *Oil on Water* provide veritable windows to appreciate the adversarial relationship between the oil companies and the coastal dwellers whose survival is threatened by oil pollution. Iheka (lends credence to this averment when he notes that:

> the people's grouse as represented in *Tides* […] is the destruction of their environment and the means of livelihood caused by oil exploration activities […] the decimation of the fish from oil activities coupled with the fishing by the local populations exact a harmful toll on the population and undermine their sustainability. (119)

It is noteworthy that oil-induced decadence of the environment is not only the cause of death of fishes and other aquatic life forms but also the death of human beings. In *Tides,* we are alerted to the health hazards of oil exploration activities when Tonwe reveals that "the noise from the exploration machines reduces my desired peace"… (5) while the environmental activist, Bickerbug, gives expression to the variegated hazards of oil pollution:

> [t]he dangers of all this oil pollution to the environment are sufficiently well known to you. The fishes die because the floating oil blocks the oxygen from the water or because their respiratory membrances are clogged by the oil […] the crops won't grow because the oil floating on the irrigation chokes the soil. Even the drinking water is affected […] drinking water so contaminated causes various forms of enteritis, some more severe than others… (146)

In *Oil on Water,* the hopelessness of human existence in the oil-polluted delta region is given expression by a local fisherman, Tamuno who, upon encountering the two journalists, Zaq and Rufus, beg them to take his son, Michael, away from the creeks to the city to give him a fighting chance of survival because: "He no get good future here…Wetin he go do here? Nothing…" (36). If any doubt remains as to the bleakness of life in the oil polluted creeks, the itinerant medical doctor, Dagogo Mark, removes such doubt when, from a cumulation of experience he declares: "I've been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place, a place for dying" (142-143). To cap up the portrait of the oil-polluted creeks as a place

of death, the narrator imagistically describes the scene of devastation following a final act of bombing of a major oil installation by the militants on account of which "thousands of gallons of oil floating on the water, the weight of the oil tight like a hangman's noose around the neck of whatever life-from lay underneath" (227). As though to consolidate the image of the delta as "a place for dying," (225) we find that one of the journalists, Zaq, is demised in the course of the trip becoming a symbolic epitaph for oil as death merchant. From the foregoing, we find in *Tides* and *Oil on Water*, an unvarnished declamation of the decimation of the marine ecosystem which not only destroys the people's fishing livelihood but also activates their death. Feldner lends credence to this averment when he notes that "*Oil on Water* vividly displays the destruction of the social structure, and ecosystem of the Niger-Delta through neocolonial actors who show no concern for humans and nature" (10).

It goes without saying that the attritional conflict in the Niger-Delta is inspired by the confrontation between high voltage petro-economics and the subsistent fishery economy of the coastal dwellers. In *Oil on Water,* for instance, we find that fish is not only a major food staple in the Niger-Delta but also a major source of income for the people. This explains the unwritten division of labour in the fish-based economy in which "the men [go] out fishing" while women have the responsibility of "smoking the fish" which is preserved until it is sold to buyers (24, 25, 167, 179, 222). In *Tides,* we also find that the people's existence revolves around their fishery economy. In this regard, the oil exploration and exploitation activities of the oil companies just like the construction of the Kwarafa Dam threaten their survival by "upsetting the ecological balance" of the area (149) which work hardship on the people by depressing "the fishing economy" (149). The mercantile impulse that drives oil exploration is not lost on the people. According to the local fisherman, Opene:

> Oil is money […]. Money for the government. Money for many people. But not our people. And they do not mind what they do to us so long as they protect this money from troublesome people like us. (26)

The clear implication, therefore, is that the government and the oil companies place higher premium on petrodollars than on environmental sanctity. Nwanyanwu recognizes the conflicting economic impulses in play in Okpewho's *Tides* when he avers that: "what is central to the vision in this novel is not just how the individual is being subjected to dominant culture, but also how the economic axis dominates

environmental practices" (11). The effect is that environmental devastation is driven by a petro-economic agenda. Terminski makes the same point when he submits that "the purpose of the oil industry is not to support local development but to maximize the incomes of petrochemical corporations from developed countries" (3). The corollary of the foregoing is that the economics of marine oil pollution constitutes a threat to the fishing livelihood and cultural heritage of the people who consequentially view the oil companies and their facilitators as enemies.

Fishery, Cultural Symbolisation and Spirituality

In the ideology of self preservation, the survival of the physical environment is tied to the survival of an ethnic society (10). The explanation is that the physical environment is at once a marker of a society's cultural identity and a source of provision for their material existence. In appreciation of the material connectivity between the fisheries livelihood of coastal communities and their cultural and spiritual worldview, the Food and Agricultural Organization notes that:

> In most small-scale fishing communities where fisheries activities support a significant portion of the local populace, the various fishing occupations that community members pursue will be interwoven through the whole fabric of the community's local culture, pervading practically all of the main components of its cultural system. (FAO 7)

The contention that the devastation of a people's physical environment evinces the erosion of their cultural and spiritual mooring finds support in the fact that fishing culture includes the modes of fish production such as catching and processing (Sheng and Huili 131-132) and the people's unique life style, customs, and religious faith (Zhu and Dongyao 1). This is because, the nature of the marine ecosystem on which the people's livelihood depends constitutes "an important determinant of many of the cultural characteristics of small-scale fishing communities" (FAO 5). This holds true for the riverine people of Nigeria's Niger-Delta region because as Nwanyanwu has noted, among the Ijaws for instance, "the physical represents an important trope in [their] cultural memory…" (10). In *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* Isidore Okpewho and Helon Habila respectively, thematize the oil-driven degradation of the Niger-Delta environment as a modality of economic oppression and the collateral erosion of the people's cultural and spiritual anchors.

In *Tides,* for instance, the significance of fishery as a cultural endeavour is amplified by Piriye's lamentation that oil-exploration activities "are gradually

destroying the resources that have traditionally nurtured our people since time immemorial" (7). Piriye also adds that "nothing matters to me now more than the salvation of our homeland and the preservation of our heritage" (8). We find a further dramatization of the cultural affinity between the fishermen and their physical environment when Tonwe states that they are fighting for "the land and the people" (82-83). To consolidate the linkage between environmental degradation and cultural erosion, the radical environmentalist, Bickerbug, laments that oil exploration activities have occasioned the "desecration of traditional shrines…" (18). The foregoing underscores the people's affinity to their ecology and portrays the Niger-Delta region as an environmental and cultural wasteland inspired by oil exploration activities. Nwanyanwu conceptualizes the twin portrait of environmental devastation and the destruction of the community's cultural artifacts as "a metaphoric representation of the land as a cultural symbol" (10). The clear implication is that the destruction of the environment is coterminous with the destabilization of the people in its various ramifications.

Correspondingly, in *Oil on Water,* we find that the undercurrent for the violent rebellion by the militants is the realization that the despoliation of the environment undergirds the dislocation of the people from their homeland. For instance, when probed as to their identity, one of the militant groups simply replies: "we are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand" (154). This indicates that their group identity cannot be constructed outside the environment in which their cultural roots are entwined. Similarly, the leader of one of another militant group who goes by the name, Professor, stresses that the devastation of the environment is the cause of their violent rebellion against the government and the oil companies (221). It is to be noted that for coastal people such as the Niger-Deltans, "land" is not merely the surface of the earth but the totality of the geographical space which is, in their case, dominated by water. It bears due stress that the destruction of the environment of riverine people is a subtext for their economic oppression, physical dislocation, and cultural uprootment. The FAO2 eloquently makes this point by stressing that many fishing people hold "the belief that they and the marine creatures they exploit have parallel lives and mixed destinies …." (9) .

Furthermore, in *Tides,* the cultural scaffold upon which the declamation of the environmental degradation of the Niger-Delta is constructed is the fact that each of the three sections or movements of the novel entitled "ripple," "billow," and "flood" respectively is preceded by of an Ijaw folk song. The first song depicts the struggle of the fisherman with the elements while the second depicts the anguish of riverine

people confronted with the impact of flood and other natural disasters (46). The third and last is a song of lamentation of the ruination of the fishery livelihood of the delta dwellers:

> … Alas, poor me
> Woe, I'm done for!
> Father fenced the fishes into/a lake
> But the rain-god has burst/its banks
> And all the fishes have disappeared! (p. 123)

The rather emblematic title of the above section as "flood" is a metaphor for the despoliation of the environment by the oil companies while the disappearance of "all the fishes" parabolically underline the destruction of the people's fishery livelihood by oil pollution. In the context of this paper, the significance of the folk songs as emblems of group identity and cultural expression should not be glossed over. This is because as Austin has stressed, "culture consists of systems of symbols […], and culture as a system of symbols is the veil of interpretation between man and his environment" (45). It seems plausible, therefore, to assert that the folk songs in *Tides* constitute part of the systems of symbols and that the specific reference to the disappearance of fishes is a parabolic commentary on the devastation of the environment and the fishery livelihood of the people. It is instructive that in the African *mythological schema,* folk songs and folk tales constitute a point of intersection and concourse between human and non-human actors. From an ecocritical point of view, folk songs and folk tales are modalities of mediation between human beings and the ecosystem. Iheka lends credence to this averment when he notes that "[folk] tales [much like folk songs] are aprpos for the unique embodiment of their characters – straddling the human and non-human realm in ways that undercut human exceptionalism" (64). This means, simplicita, that folk characters such as fishes occupy an interstitial space in which human beings are not accorded autonomous existence but a relational one with non-humans.

As we have noted, the transactional relationship between fisher people and their environment is not only cultural but also spiritual. In *Oil on Water,* for instance, we find that the animist sect whose shrine is located at the banks of Irikefe was founded as a project of environmental restoration. On the origin of the animist sect, one of the Priests, Naman says:

> The shrine started a long time ago after a terrible war […] when the blood of

> the dead ran in the rivers, and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died, and the dead bodies of warriors floated for miles on the river […]. It was a terrible time. The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. That was when the priests from different shrines got together and decided to build this shrine by the river. The land needed to be cleansed of blood, and pollution. (121)

The pollution of the rivers saturated with blood occasioning the death of human beings and fishes mirrors the pollution of the marine ecosystem by oil exploration activities causing the destruction of the fishery livelihood of the people. The act of environmental restoration and the move to stem the tide of oil pollution by building the shrine amount to a cultural initiative to restore the spiritual equilibrium of the community (122, 130).

Similarly, in *Tides,* we also notice the nexus between environmental restoration and the preservation of the material, cultural and spiritual existence of the people. In this regard, we find that following his bombing of oil installations and the devastation of the Kwarafa Dam, the environmental activist, Bickerbug, triumphantly declares:

> Well, well, well, Piriye
> We have won, haven't we?...
> Our people have won, the water is flowing again full stream. The tides are here again. Soon there'll be plenty of fishes swimming again, eh? (198)

It is instructive that in Bickerbug's calculation, the essential barometer for measuring the success of the operation and the victory of the people is the prospect of having "plenty fishes swimming again" in the rivers. However, beyond the restoration of the environment and the fishery livelihood of the people, Bickerbug does not lose sight of the spiritual significance of the environmental project. In this regard, following his bombing of oil installations, Bickerbug disguises himself "as a Roman Catholic Priest from Cross River State under the name of Reverend Father Pascal Obongha…" (197) as he tries to escape. In this way, the novelist casts the environmental activist as a salvationary personage thereby underscoring the connectivity between environmentalism and spirituality. This is because in catholic theology, Jesus Christ is regarded as the Pascal lamb (an object of sacrifice) whose earthly mission is for the salvation of humankind.

In the face of our schematization of the environment as the repository of

the material and spiritual essence of the people, the issue arises as to the place of militancy and violence in that complex matrix. In *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* Okpewho and Habila respectively portray violent rebellion as a reaction to the menace of environmental degradation by the oil companies. In *Tides,* for instance, while Piriye and Tonwe disclaim violence as a strategy of environmental activism because "physical confrontation was bound to worsen the problem" (163) they, however, rationalize violence as a consequence of the "corrupt disregard for the welfare of the people" (163). Similarly, in *Oil on Water,* Professor blames the devastation of the environment by the oil companies and the brutality of security agencies as the cause of the militants' violent escapades. Urging the journalist, Rufus, to bear witness to the plight of the Niger-Delta people, Professor exhorts him as follows: "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 we are hounded daily in our own land…" (221).

From both *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* the picture that comes across is a celebratory portrayal of militancy and violence as resistance. Feghabo's approval of the violent methods of Bickerbug in *Tides* and by extension Professor in *Oil on Water* stems from his persuasion that "through this act [of blowing up oil installations] Okpewho's vision of the triumph of the oppressed people of the Niger-Delta through revolution becomes glaring" (60). However, it needs be noted that in the recourse to violence as a modality of environmental activism, the snag is that both the environment itself and the people themselves are as much the victims of oil exploration activities as they are of the militants. This represents what Hamilton describes as a "double process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization" (95). Bickerbug's destruction of the Kwarafa Dam in *Tides* constitutes an act of deterritorialisation resulting in "the water flowing again" and the return of "plenty of fishes" (198) evincing reterritorialisation or restoration. Ironically, however, the blowing up of the dam is attended with the devastation of the environment: "the dam has been blown up! Everything has been swept away by the river, and it is now swallowing up this road with incredible speed […] and the submersion of villages for miles around…" (194).

The effect is that violence as a modality of environmental advocacy begets a corresponding environmental devastation often comparable to or even more injurious than the condition that inspired it. It is in this context that Sumner and Wiedman (2013:870), for instance, have contested the appropriateness of ecoterrorism as a framework of environmental activism. The corollary of the foregoing is that marine oil pollution constitutes a threat to the fisheries economy of

the people with dire consequences to their cultural heritage and spiritual well-being, a situation that often inspires violence and displacement.

Fishery and the Contours of Displacement

Displacement may be operationally construed as a form of migration in which individuals are forced to move against their will (Shamsuddoha *et al* 19). When such forced movement takes place within a country's territorial jurisdiction, it is regarded as internal displacement. The literature of internal displacement foregrounds four overlapping categories: conflict-induced displacement, disaster-induced displacement, development-induced displacement and environmentally induced displacement (Zetter 8). It is estimated that as of the end of 2019, about 50.8 million people globally were living in internal displacement on account of conflict, violence and disaster (IDMC 1). The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1988) defines internally displaced persons as:

> persons or groups who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. (IDMC, 2020)

From the above definition, the key elements are the involuntary character of movement and the fact that such movement takes place within nationally defined boundaries. However, the above definition is patently inadequate because it fails to capture a number of critical factors implicated in displacement. For one, some movements (or migrations) may be voluntary and for another, people may be displaced by extreme poverty. Also, there could be displacement without movement or relocation (Ibeanu 82-83). In Nigeria's Niger-Delta region, displacement has been closely linked to oil exploration and production (Oluyemi 2).

It is difficult to pigeonhole the problems associated with oil exploitation activities in Nigeria into one specific category (Terminski 15-16) because although oil related displacement may be chiefly environmental, other categories of internal displacement are also implicated in petroleum related activities. The three main patterns of oil-related displacement that have been identified in the Niger-Delta are clashes between the Nigerian army and militant groups, fighting among the different militant groups; and sundry environmental problems occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation (Oluyemi 28). In Okpewho's *Tides* and Habila's *Oil on Water,*

discernible problems associated with crude-oil activities include contamination of drinking water, loss of fish, low agricultural productivity, chemical contamination and risk of disease, which often force people to leave their habitual places of residence (Terminski 6).

In *Oil on Water,* for instance, we find that prior to the commencement of oil exploration activities in the delta, the people lived contentedly in paradisal harmony with the environment. For instance, about chief Ibiram's village, we are told that: "Once upon a time they lived in paradise. It was a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy" (38). But the coming of the oil companies inaugurated the devastation of the environment and the enthronement of violence which forced the people out of their places of habitual residence. For example, when Rufus enquires why the village is deserted, the old man's reply is that "Dem left because of too much fighting" (7) thereby foregrounding the fact of displacement owing to oil-inspired violence. Tellingly, the ecological devastation of chief Ibiram's Yellow Island is not isolated as the narrator informs us that "the next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and fragrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air…" (8).

The displacement of the people and their forced migration is a combination of the devastation of their homeland by oil exploration activities and their search for economic survival following the destruction of their fishery livelihood. We learn that the traumatized coastal dwellers "were speaking of the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water and how soon they might have to move to a place where fishing was still fairly good" (16). The community leader, chief Ibiram captures the plight of the people who are forced to a state of constant migration:

> … we headed northwards, we've lived in five different places now, but always we've had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard […] I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home? (41)

Throughout the novel, we are treated to gory details of the despoliation of the environment by oil exploration activities, the deprivation of the people following the decimation of their fishery economy leading to their homelessness and forced migration. The common features of the delta landscape are "deserted villages" (148) "with the whole clan on the move" (183) leaving behind "flood plains where

village[s] had once stood" (184) as the displaced villagers "camped in a forest not far from the river, where their boats, laden with their meager belongings, waited near the trees and rocks on the banks…" (185).

While the displacement of the Niger-Deltans fits the definition of internal displacement as offered by the UN Guiding Principles cited earlier, it does not, however, represent the full picture. This is because as Opukri and Ibaba (175) have argued, voluntary migration in search of means of livelihood or economic survival occasioned by occupational loss is also a form of internal displacement. The rationale for this averment is that internally displaced persons may also be victims of structural causes such as poverty (Toure 11). This is exactly the situation in the Niger-Delta where oil pollution has induced the internal displacement of the people by aggravating their level of poverty and diminishing their capacity for self sustenance (Opukri and Ibaba 190). It is plausible, therefore, to contend that the exclusion of the victims of extreme poverty in the definition of internally displaced persons by the UN, makes it rather narrow and inadequate (Zard 2002). The point being made is that occupational displacement of the type referred to in *Oil on Water,* for instance, where "dwindling fish stocks in the river and rising toxicity of the water" (16) force the people to move in search of "a place where fishing if fairly good" (16) must be seen as a vista of internal displacement arising from their occupational disorientation making them "live in their own country as if they are aliens" (Opukri and Ibaba 189).

Correspondingly, in *Tides,* we also find that oil exploration activities have led to the devastation of the environment, the destruction of their fishery livelihood and their displacement resulting in their forced migration in search of economic survival, peace, and security. The retired journalist and village-dweller, Tonwe, tellingly captures the vicissitudes of the people from the oil exploration activities as follows:

> The village has been completely wiped out by the floating oil, and most of the people have resettled in Burutu. There is another one near Birebe. There is practically no fishing life there anymore, because the fishes die and float on the black surface of the water in large numbers. Many of the people have moved out to resettle in places like Emevor and Igbide. (27)

The forced movement of people out of their habitual locations underlines their internal displacement rooted in environmental insecurity because to be environmentally secure, "the ecosystem within which they live must have the

capacity to support the healthy pursuit of their livelihoods" (Hens, 2005:4). This is not the case for the fisher folks of the Niger-Delta region where oil pollution has devastated the environment.

It is noteworthy that in *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* the narrative structure of both works revolve around journalists who double as narrators and witnesses of the action of the novels. From their journalistic lenses, the reader becomes a vicarious participant and witness to the pollution of the aquatic environment, the disruption of the people's fishery economy and their physical and cultural displacement. In *Tides,* for instance, the narrator and initiator of the book project for environmental conservation, Piriye, outlines the manifesto of the journalistic enterprise as a mission to "produce a book that will long remain an authoritative testimony to the plight of our people, the Beniotu people, in these times" (3). By deploying their professional skills in that manner, the journalists attempt to bring the environmental degradation of the Niger-Delta to the forecourt of public consciousness and to invest their accounts with credibility and verisimilitude.

In the works under focus, the media and media practitioners not only assume their traditional roles as the vanguards of the oppressed but also the agents and symbols of environmental sensitization. Through the correspondents, Piriye and Tonwe, and the other journalists in the *Chronicle* newspaper such as Lati, for instance, the reader comes to the awareness of "classified information and some very incriminating photographs of the damages suffered by the Niger-Delta communities…" (17). The media also serve to trumpet the ecological devastation of the delta region and the attendant frustration of the people by constantly advertising "the woes of the Niger-Delta" (17). This is in tandem with Edward Said's schematization of the role of the writer and intellectual in crisis situations as the internationalization of such conflict. According to Said , the task of the intellectual is "to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered" (43-44). In *Tides*, the journalists actively universalize the ecological devastation of the delta drawing the attention of the international community to their plight.

Similarly, in *Oil on Water,* the commissioning of the journalists to journey through the creeks of the Niger-Delta to confirm whether the kidnapped wife of the expatriate oil worker, Isabel Floode, is alive or not (29) becomes the "roving license" to tour the delta region and to witness first hand, the environmental degradation of the area. We also learn that the kidnappers, eager for publicity, use the media to publicize their grievances against the authorities for which "they would make long speeches about the environment and their reason for taking up

arms against the oil companies and the government" (50). By journeying through different parts of the coastal landscape, the journalists come face to face with diverse snippets of the despoliation of the environment and the dispossession of the people economically and culturally. Among the telling representations of the journalists as witnesses to ecological devastation, the daily ritual of drenching the captured freedom fighters with petrol starkly stand out. Though horrified by the sight, Rufus continued to observe the exercise as a matter of professional obligation because "I was a journalist: my job was to observe, and to write about it later. To be a witness for posterity…" (55). From the accounts of the journalists, the reader is inexorably and vicariously drawn into the fray as a witness to the degradation of the environment.

In *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* therefore, Okpewho and Habila, respectively, employ the newspaper and newspaper men as vehicles for drawing public attention to the environmental crises in the delta, the disruption of the people's fishery livelihood and their cultural, occupational and physical displacement. As a result, "the newspaper becomes a public sphere for sensitizing people to the problems surrounding them, the newspaper also becomes a technology for ecological thought" (Iheka 158). In both works under reference, journalists act as participant observers and social witnesses to the vicissitudes of the people and the environment. The effect is that as Feldner has noted concerning *Oil on Water,* "the act of journalistic writing is ultimately also represented as an important form of activism, witnessing and chronicling" (5). By projecting journalists as conservationists and witnesses for posterity, *Tides* and *Oil On Water* underline the role of writers as stakeholders and chroniclers of the pulsations of environmental relations.

Conclusion

Nigeria's Niger-Delta region is one of the most important wetlands and marine ecosystems in the world. It commands global attention on account of the quantum of hydrocarbon deposits in the area, the exploitation of which is implicated in the ecological devastation of the region. The diminishment of the marine capital of the delta by oil pollution injuriously affects the people, their cultural heritage, and psychological wellbeing. In *Tides* and *Oil on Water,* Isidore Okpewho and Helon Habila respectively, thematize the disruption of the people's fishery livelihood in the wake marine oil pollution leading to their occupational and physical displacement. By deftly deploying journalists as "roving reporters" who journey through the creeks of the delta region, the novelists enable the reader to vicariously witness the sights and sounds of ecological devastation of the delta and by so doing, invest their

accounts with credibility and realism necessary to nudge the conscience of the world to the plight of the people. From an ecocritical perspective, *Tides* and *Oil On Water* constitute a rallying cry against mindless anthropogenic activities which not only destroy the environment but also set humankind against itself. We envisage that the implementation of the recommendations set out above would deepen the cause of environmental conservation and stem the tide of oil-induced ecological devastation of the Niger-Delta with its diverse collateral consequences.

Works Cited

Agbogun, James. "Tradition, Politics and Religion of the Niger-Delta Ethnic Group of Nigeria." *The Nigeria: Nigeria, People and Culture.* 12 October 2014. Available at:
http://www.the-nigeria.com/2011/10/tradition-politics-and-religion-of.html#.VP50tvnf OU.

Auerbach, David. "*Oil on Water* By Helon Habila." WAGGISH, 13 July 2014. www.waggish.org>oil-on-water-by...

Austin, Diane J. "Symbols and Culture: Some Philosophical Assumptions in the work of Clifford Geertz." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology,* No 3, December 1979, pp. 45-59. www.jstor.org>stable.

Awosika, L.F. "Impacts of global climate change and sea level rise on coastal resources and energy development in Nigeria." *Global Climate Change; Impact on Energy Development,* edited by Umolu, J. C. DAMTECH Nigeria Ltd, Nigeria, 1995.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory.* (Fourth ed.) Manchester: Manchester UP, 2017.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture.* Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1995.

Cordell, John. *A Sea of Small Boats.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cultural Survival, *Inc.* Cultural Survival Report 26, 1989.

Dawodu, S. O. "Eco-Critical reading of selected poems of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide," Master's Dissertation, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 2011.

Edebor, Solomon Adedokun. "Rape of a Nation: An Eco-Critical Reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*." *International Journal of Arts Management,* vol. 6, no. 9, September 2017, pp. 41-49. Doi:10.18533/journal.v619.983.

Feghabo, Charles Cliff. "Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day:* A Kinesis of Eco-Activism from Theory to Praxis." *Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes.* New York: African Heritage Press, 2013, pp. 47-73.

Feldner, Maximilian. "Representing the Neocolonial Destruction of the Niger-Delta: Helon Habila's *Oil on Water." Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* vol. 54, no. 4, 23 April 2018. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855. 2018.1451358

Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). "2 Cultural Characteristics of Small-Scale Fishing Communities," 2016. http://www.fao.org/docrep/004/y1290e05.htm

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom.* London: Routledge, 2004.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, & Harold Fromm. 1996. "Introduction," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: Georgia UP, 1996, pp. xv-xxxvii.

Habila, Helon. *Oil on Water.* Lagos, Nigeria: Parresia Publishers Ltd, 2012.

Hamilton, Grant. *On Representation: Deleuze and Coetzee on the Colonized Subject.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011.

Hens, Luc. "Environmentally Displaced People," *Regional Sustainable Development Review: Africa* (Encyclopedia of Life Support Systeem) 2005. www.web.mnstate.edu>robertsb.

Ibeanu, Okechukwu. 1998. "Exiles in their Own Home: Internal Population Displacement in Nigeria." *African Association of Political Science*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1998, pp. 80-97.

Iheka, Cajetan N. "African Literature and the Environment: A Study in Postcolonial Ecocriticism" Ph.D Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2015. www.d.lib.msu.edu>download.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). "Internal Displacement." *IDMC Report,* Geneva, Switzerland, 2020. www.internal-displacement.org>int...

Johnson, L. "Greening the Library: the Fundamentals and Future of Ecocritism." *Choice Reviews Online*, 2009, pp. 7-13.

Kadafa, Adati Ayuba. "Oil Exploration and Spillage in the Niger-Delta of Nigeria." *Civil and Environmental Research,* vol. 2, no. 3, 2012, pp. 38-51.

Medovoi, Leerom. 2014. "Remediation as Phramikon." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2014, pp. 15-24. doi:10.1215/00104124-2414896.

Nwanyanwu, A. U. "Apocalyptic Vision and the Quest for Ethnic Identity in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*." *International Journal of English Research,* vol. 5, no. 2, March 2019, pp. 8-12. www.englishjournals.com

Obi, Cyril, and Siri Aas Rustad. "Introduction: Petro-violence in the Niger-Delta-the complex politics of an insurgency." *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger-Delta.* London: Zed Books, 2011.

Oboreh, J.S. "The Origins and the Causes of Crisis in the Niger-Delta: The Way Forward." *Anatomy of the Niger-Delta Crisis: Causes, Consequences and Opportunities for Peace,* edited by Victor Ojakorotu. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010, pp. 17-36.

Okonta, Ike and Oronto Douglas. 2001. *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger-Delta.* San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001.

Okpewho, Isidore. *Tides.* London: Longman, 1993.

Oluyemi, Fayomi. "Displacement in the Context of social Crises in the Oil-Rich Niger-Delta of Nigeria and Oil-Rich Bakassi Peninsula in Cameroon." *International Journal of Social*

Work and Human Services Practice. vol. 2, no. 1, February, 2014, pp. 28-34. www.hrpub.org>download.

Omoko, Peter. "Revisiting Isidore Okpewho's Orature and African Literature." *Guardian Arts,* Lagos, 18 March, 2018. www.guardian.ng>arts>revisiting-isidore...

Opukri, C. O. & Ibaba, Samuel Ibaba. "Oil-induced Environmental Degradation and Internal Population Displacement in the Nigeria's Niger-Delta." *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa,* vol. 10, no. 1, 2008, pp. 173-193. www.jsd-africa.com>

Osuagwu, Eze Simpson & Olaifa, Eseoghene. 2018. "Effects of Oil Spills on Fish Production in the Niger-Delta." PLOS ONE, vol. 13, no.10, 25 October 2018. https://doi.org/10/1371/journal.pone.0205114.

Plessl, C. *et al.* 2017. "Fish as bioindicators for trace element pollution from two contrasting lakes in the Eastern Rift Valley, Kenya: Spatial and temporal aspects." *Environmental Sciences and Pollution Research*, 7 July 2017. Pmid. 28685334.

Ruddle, Kenneth, and Tomoya Akimichi, eds. *Maritime Institutions in the Western Pacific.* Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology. Senri Ethnological Studies, no. 17, 2017.

Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, 1996, pp. 105-123.

Said, Edward. *Representations of the Intellectual.* London: Vintage Books, 1994.

Sam, K., Coulton and F. Prpich, G. 2017. "A Multi-attribute Methodology for the Prioritization of Oil Contaminated Sites in the Niger-Delta" *Science of the Total Environment,* vol. 579, 1 February 2017, pp. 1323 –1332. Pmid: 27916308

Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy.* London: Saro International Publishers, 1992.

Shamsuddoha, Md. *et al.* "Displacement and Migration from Climate Hot-Spots in Bangladesh: Causes and Consequences." *Action Aid Bangladesh,* August, 2012, pp. 1-36.

Sheng, Shou & Chang Huili. "Development Study on Chinese Fishery Festivals." *Journal of Jinan University* (Social Science Version), vol. 3, 2010, pp. 131-132.

Slaymaker, William. 2001. "Echoing the Other(s): The Global Green and Black African Responses." *PMLA* 116.1, 2001, pp. 129-44.

Sumner, David Thomas & Lisa M. Wiedman. 2013. "Eco-terrorism or Eco-tage: An Argument for the Proper Frame." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,* vol. 20, no. 4, 2013, pp. 856-876.

Terminski, Bogumil. 2011. "Oil-induced Displacement and Resettlement: Social Problems and Human Rights Issues." Paper Presented at the Conference on (New) Debates on Belonging, The Graduate Center Immigration Working Group, City University of New York, 14 October 2011, pp. 1-18. www.files.ethz>isn.

Toure, Mohamed. "Report of First Regional Conference on International Displacement in West Africa." Abuja, Nigeria, 26–28 April 2006.

Zard, Monette. "The Internationally Displaced in Perspective" *Migration Policy Institute*, 2002.

Zetter, R. "Protecting of environmentally displaced people: Developing the capacity of legal and normative frameworks," *Research Report,* Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International, University of Oxford, February 2011.

Zhu, Liu & Liu Dongyao. 2016. "The Analysis of Fish Cultural Conotation and its Aesthetic Value." Paper presented at the 2nd International Conference on Economy, Management and Education Technology (ICEMET 2016), pp. 2007-2013. www.download.altantis-press.com.