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ECO-EXISTENTIAL DIALECTICS IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's *Poetics* records extensively on the form known as tragedy. In Aristotle's postulations, however, it is found that tragedy is the exclusive preserve of a certain class. For him, the tragic hero must come from the class of nobles. In *Poetics* tragedy is given to be "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude… through pity and fear, effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (S.H. Butcher's translation). In classical drama which provides the material for Aristotle's analysis of tragedy, there are several elements of drama, one of which is the influence of the supernatural. Therefore, "Whereas the supernatural does not alleviate suffering yet, often it imbues pain with meaning. Relationship with a divine power enables the protagonists of classical tragedies such as Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to acquiesce nobly to an otherwise wretched existence." (Brueck, *The Redemption of Tragedy* 3). Down the line, such elements as the existence of the supernatural are no longer prerequisite for tragic drama to be born. Several critics have refuted Aristotle's streamlined notion of tragedy, one of the greatest being Arthur Miller's 20th Century essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man" which has at its center the claim that the common man is as fit a subject for tragedy as the nobles. Miller's arguments set out to establish his protagonist, Willy Loman, as a tragic hero, even though he is a "low man." For Arthur Miller, "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (1).

Aristotle outlines six elements of tragedy, most of which have been reviewed by modern critics. One of the greatest refutations of Aristotle is that offered by Arthur Miller in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" written to defend his low character Willy Loman against the classical claim in *Poetics* about the hero. Miller claims that the "insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character, is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy" (2). For him, and for many more

critics, these "outward forms of tragedy" are not integral to the constitution of the form. Tragedy thus is hinged on the characters' ability for struggle. He defines tragedy to be "the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly." (2)

Thus, tragedy entails the attempt by a man to "wholly realize himself…. Which is not to say that tragedy must preach revolution…" (2). In Miller above, the view is that what activates the tragic view is that one is faced with the need to "wholly realize himself." One would have attained high status as such if one can but strive to "wholly realize himself." It is this same view which Nietzsche captures in his idea of a "titanically striving individual". The result is that struggle becomes central in the definition of tragedy. So that the plight of the hero can only be fully understood when one sees him as a struggling individual. It is in this sense first and foremost that Zaq qualifies for a reading as the tragic hero of *Oil on Water*, nor is he more of a tragic character than Rufus, the narrator. This tragedy is complicated by the placement of the natural environment and the human environment. But it is also true that this kind of placement is not new. We find traces in earlier literatures like *The Odyssey*, *Heart of Darkness* and *The Old man and the Sea*, where nature in its various aspects is metaphorized.

This paper proceeds by attempting the question, "what does it mean to be?" This is most definitely a philosophical question. But it is attempted here in relation to the ecology. And it appears that in attempting this question one finds himself trailing such thoughts as the solitary state that Hobbes imagined in his state of nature. The text of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has a vast sea of critical acclaims, in line with the ecological concerns that it raises for the people of the Niger-Delta regions. This paper follows through the paths of existential ecocriticism which we see as a shade of ecoexistentialism. Existentialism and ecocriticism are hereby studied to reveal underlying interrelations, as well as the figuration of this simulation in the world of the text. The fact of seeing this novel from the point of view of ecoexistentialism, and that this is generative of, and in a directly proportional relationship with tragedy as it happens in the text, is peculiar to this research.

This study will be a worthwhile contribution to the discipline of literary criticism. It is also an added study to the existing studies on Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. We understand that Literature only creates an "as if" world, so that the world in the text is only

"as if" Nigeria, in which case it can be about human beings anywhere there is an oil economy of the sort for instance, about the world. Helon Habila is one of the few Nigerian writers whose works prioritize ecoactivism. His writings present a crusade against the ecocidal acts perpetrated on the environment. By ecocide is meant the deliberate destruction of the ecosystem by man's acts of exploration (Manes 7). Habila's works have focused on the degradation in the Niger-Delta. *Oil on Water* echoes his other works such as *Waiting for an Angel*.

Agofure writes that the "Writer['s] signification of the deliberate degradation of the Nigerian landscape by the Nigerian ruling class in collaboration with multinational companies point to a trend in the postcolonial situation that puts power and authority at the service of the market and at the expense of public good" (Agofure 249). As for environmental literary criticism, Buell notes that it has been largely linked to space and "[has arisen] within and against the history of human modification of planetary space [tracing] the erosive effect of the pace of transformation upon the stability of locale and the assumption of belonging to it" (Buell, *The Future,* 62). Consequently, literary ecocriticism cannot "theorize scrupulously about a place without confronting its fragility [...] at a time when fewer and fewer of the world's population live out their lives in locations that are not shaped to a great extent by translocal – ultimately global - forces" (Buell, *The Future,* 62-63, qtd in "Oil and Literature"). We follow through the foregoing to find that the *place* in question could be a reference to the "worldhood" of dasein (Heidegger *Being and Time*).

In Marc Stoehr, we see that the people of the Niger are battling with the effects of oil exploration. It is given that "Habila paints with painstaking details the destruction caused by the oil industry. (1) However, we do not share in his opinion that the setting of the novel depicts a political statement (2). Our view is that the setting is a sleek metaphor for the underlying human tragedy. The current research sees his terms "unsustainability and sustainability" as a reference to the human capacity to survive the tragedy and travails of oil pollution, which is in turn suffered by the environment, as Stoehr puts it, "how the toxic waste, the pipes and the flares affect both nature and population." (3) Marc Stoehr's paper has Marxist undertones. He highlights the economic effects of oil degradation of the environment on the local population, in a typical capitalist economy, characteristically

profit-driven. One is ordinarily here reminded of the mythic story in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, with its Marxists underpinnings. Our research encapsulates this dialectic of materialism within the tragic myth. This research differs from Stoehr's in that in this the writer figures the wider frame of tragedy as responsible for the actions and inactions of the government and the oil companies. It is Zaq's tragedy of decline.

Stoehr, moreover, adopts the postcolonial theory to assert that the text is an example of the persistence of the colonial culture even in the wake of the end of colonialism. For him, the actions of the oil company reflect the corrupt tendencies of a neocolonial state, one that is still caught in-between the throes of extreme poverty and abundant human and natural resources. In the current research, we share Stoehr's view captured above, but go beyond the immediate purview of the environmental crisis to relate it with the underlying human tragedy taking place in the novel. Rufus, like Zaq, is reclining or falling fast and freely. Like Saitan, or Gibreel Farishta (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*) nothing can avert their tragedies. Thus, we see in them the image of Prometheus, "an ill-fated god in durance … him that hath incurred the detestation of all the gods who frequent the court of Jupiter, by reason of [his] excessive friendliness to mortals" (*Prometheus Bound*, 11), and the one who "has no device whereby he may escape from his present Misfortune" (4)

Chengyi Coral Wu's "Towards an African-Focused Ecocriticism" focuses on a placement of the text in the light of the tragedy of oil for Nigeria. However, it would seem that as Steiner argues, "the sociological poetics [] promulgated proceed from the assumption that the literary fact is first of all an ideological fact" (Steiner, 27 qtd in Akwanya, *Literary Criticism*, 61). We recognize the place of the text by identifying it first as part of tradition by its tragic orientations.

Wu, however, holds that "Rufus negotiates both his identity as a minority member of Nigeria and the violence that attends to the "oil complex" of the Niger Delta, his home." (220) For us in this research, the characters Zaq and Rufus are undergoing a human tragedy through the impacts of the environmental degradation and stringent government control of the resources of the NigerDelta, that these two worlds (the human and the ecological) are continuously being depleted and interwoven within a symbiotic tragic vault. Wu's analysis still shows how oil meant an environmental tragedy for the people of the region.

Mara Fiorini studies the text "within Postcolonial Ecocriticism, which focuses on the environmental dimension of postcolonial literary works and investigates how the colonial and neo-colonial projects do not include only the exploitation of native people but also of colonial environments." (3) The thesis adopts Hubert Zapf's idea of Cultural Ecology of Literature where literature is seen as a cultural undertaking that creates an affinity of sorts between humans and their environment, and studies the two aspects of ecology and the human environment in the text. The argument that her paper makes is that suffering subsists on two levels in the novel. But the two levels are investigated as independent units. Our research holds that these two exist in what we have tagged a *symbiotic tragic vault*. Fiorini is careful to observe the passage in the novel where "the grass' blades appear 'covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands,' (Habila 10) [and points out that] this comparison shows how the environment endures the same sufferings as the people of the Delta." (40) We are more concerned with the structural elements of tragedy as identified in Aristotle and as such do not share in the claim that Habila "fails to suggest pragmatic solutions to the staggering challenges confronting the oil-polluted and violence-ridden nation of Niger Delta" (Fiorini 1).

ECO-EXISTENTIALISM

There is a sense in which existentialism is the founding philosophy of existence. Kierkegaard is arguably the first philosopher of existentialism. As we know, his writings evolved in stark opposition to Hegel's, such that whereas Hegel holds that the question of being proceeds from the self and extends outwards, until it implicates the universal, Kierkegaard thinks the individual is the highest point of the human system. He is as a matter-of-fact the perfect expression of being. So that understanding the self becomes the new problem of being. And, it would be assumed that coming to terms with the self implicates coming to terms with the universal. Kantian opposition of ontological proof set the pace for these schools of opposition.

The second epoch of the movement of existentialism was born with the advent of

Heidegger and Jaspers, two German philosophers who translated the works of Kierkegaard. (17-18). Jaspers refutes Hegel's idea of the absolute by stating that the possibilities of being are infinite, but one can only attain one and sacrifice the other. Jaspers holds that the absolute is "something hidden" (Satre 18). Heidegger on his part opines that the basic question is Being, and not existentialism.

Thus, we figure that the narrative is existential insomuch as it presents characters whom we understand as circumventing and wading their way through existence. If we follow Heidegger for example, one finds that the basic question is with Dasein's being-in-the-world. So that Zaq and Rufus become readable as figures within the existentialist frame of thought, in line with the claim that existentialism raises "questions regarding authenticity, freedom, anxiety, free will, choice, decision, responsibility, relationship, subjectivity, meaning and values, as well as tragic dimensions such as suffering, guilt, transitoriness, finiteness and death." (Stumm 1). These questions offer a view of being in the world of *Oil on Water*. It presents the possibilities that confront man as he traverses the world. Existentialism raises and attempts to answer the question, what does it mean to be?

Ecocriticism as a literary theory is fairly new, in comparison with other literary theories like formalism and structuralism, nor can it strictly speaking be regarded as a literary theory. This is because, with theory, the focus is on language, in terms of literary studies. But it does appear that rather than the preoccupation with language, ecocriticism presents a critique of the relationship between man and his environment and how this has been represented in literature. That is probably why at the beginning it "met with considerable resistance" from the academia, but "has gained increasing recognition as an important new field of research and teaching that opens up a broad spectrum of new perspectives and that can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and of literary studies" (Zapf 136).

What this research establishes is the claim that there is a way in which the sufferings of the human figures in the text resonates the environmental tragedy that is brewing underneath. In a subtle metonymical relationship of transference, the natural environment represents the human environment or rather echoes it, and vice-versa. We are concerned with how the views of existentialism and ecocriticism intersect (as eco-existentialism) to formulate a simultaneous tragic equation in Habila's *Oil on Water*. There are critics like Joyce Onoromhenre who agree with such views as we pursue here, who see the work in its

interconnectedness of species, but as far as the scope of this research extends, no research has considered adopting the existential cum ecocritical trajectories in studying the tragedy in the text.

THE TRAGIC TRAJECTORY OF EXISTENCE: CONFRONTING ECOLOGICAL REALITY IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

The claims that this paper makes subsist in the fact that the ecosystem and the human environment suffer tragic fates in the narrative. It would seem that the human tragedy mirrors the environmental tragedy. This paper follows hints in Stoehr who studies "how the toxic waste, the pipes and the flares affect both nature and population" (Stoehr 3). Several studies have accounted for the representation of the ecosystem in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. For most of these researchers, there is a strong tendency to turn a blind eye to the underlying human tragedy. The titular Oil on Water, immediately draws our attention to the representation of an ecological reality. This reality is that of oil in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria where the writer hails from. What is found is that the exploration of oil in the area is to the detriment of the natural and human environment. This is what is studied here as the tragic trajectory of existence. The study looks at the ecological reality as a way of making sense of the human tragedy taking place underneath.

Oil on Water employs the stream-of-consciousness technique where there appears the spontaneous recollection of memory and fast moving changes. Boundaries are reached and crossed in a moment. The novel opens at the point when the narrator laments his inability to navigate the narrative nuances. He points out that there is a mix up between the natural environment and the human. As we read in the opening, "I am walking down a well-lit path, with incidents neatly labeled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go of my hand, and a fog rises and covers the faces and places, and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost, and I have to make up the obscured moments as I go along, make up the faces and places, even the emotions." (Habila 11).

In the very first scene of the narrative, the narrator also reports a fire explosion, and factors in the human tragedy underneath. According to him, there was "an explosion in the

barn with the oil drums. The fire flew on the wind from house to house, and in a few minutes half the town was ablaze. Many people died, including John's father." (Habila 11) He goes on to tell of his family's suffering. This narrator is Rufus, Zaq's apprentice in journalism. His sister Boma is the site of the human contestation in the text, the one who bears the physical and psychological scars of the entire existential struggle at work in the narrative. One finds that the humans in the text only suffer the aftermath of an ecological tragedy.

Another angle of the tragic implications in the text showcases the brutality of the regime. While the environmental pollution subsists, there are cases of abuses of human rights. There is military presence everywhere in the narrative. There are the militants and then the soldiers "that were in constant war with them" (Habila 13-14). The Local inhabitants are in turn the ones who suffer the brunt of the military brutality that takes place in the text. There is the army commander who reminds one of the figure of Faust or Kurtz. This single individual is akin to Nietzsche's "one world being" (Nietzsche 71) whose will is pitted against those of the substantive antagonists or even other protagonists. As it is, it is the will to succeed pitted against the will of the fates to turn the human efforts into outright nothingness. Rufus tells of how he contemplates letting the whole charade about investigating the kidnap pass, but decides against it. In a conversation with Zaq subsequently, it is revealed that the real search is not for the woman, but a search for meaning. This is revealed by Zaq during their first exchange when he states that they are, in fact, searching for "—The meaning of the story" (Habila 12).

The concerns that Zaq raises here ponder on Heidegger's idea about the "The existential temporal analytic of Dasein, and the question of fundamental ontology as to the meaning of Being in general" (*Being and Time* 11). In fact, it does appear that for Heidegger, the basic existential puzzle is the definition of the being of man. This is also the view of Carl Jung when he writes, "as far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being" (*Memories*, ch.11). As such, it appears the entire nexus of existence subsists in the search for meaning and order. What is found in most cases is that order does not have any roots in the possibilities of being open to man, such that his search for meaning is as irresolvable and riddling as his existence.

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LIFE AND OIL POLLUTION IN HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

According to Dagnachew Adefris Gebrehiwot, "the concern with ecological crisis is not an issue of amenity but of survival for Africa." Thus, African writers engagement of the environment in literature presents an opening to the question of existence for Africans. What does it mean to live in Africa, to be African, with regards to the activities leading to environmental degradation and threatening normal existence. Habila's novel under consideration here dramatizes these events, so that we follow characters that are all caught up in the activities of the oil companies in the narrative that lead ultimately to their respective tragedies.

Naman complains that "It's the oil and the fighting. It affects everyone in a strange way. I'm going to write a book on that someday. I've been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place, a place for dying." (Habila 111). As such, the movement from "a holy community [and] a peaceful people" (102) to "[this] place is a dead place, a place for dying." (111) is a swift one, intermediated by the rise of the oil companies and their activities in the region. This foregrounds the intercessory role of oil in the narrative of pain and death. The centrality of oil in the text is brought out also in the epic narration of the origin of the conflict offered by the Major to the audience of Zaq and Rufus. The "orange flares" by the riverside would form the new town's playground. It is a town built on the basis of an oil company. As the Major later explains, the petroviolence that erupts leads to the disintegration of the community. This also affects the families and individuals who seem to be living out the same fate differently. Everywhere one turns, the novel presents a group of people whose existence is threatened. From the white man whose wife is kidnapped to Zaq and Rufus, as well as the army and the militants. There is the struggle to keep things as they are on one point and the desire for change on the other. When Henshaw, the Head militant in prison, speaks, it becomes clear that there is a bigger picture. He addresses Zaq's question about the missing woman thus:

> Is that all you want from me, to tell you whether some foreign hostage is alive or not? Who is she in the context of the war that's going on out there, the hopes and

> ambitions being created and destroyed? Can't you see the larger picture?" (Habila 119)

The clearer picture as he himself soon reveals is that "We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand." (Habila 119). Beyond the immediate purview of a struggle for the earth, the critic's eye recognizes a struggle for life, the earth or land being a suitable metaphor for existence and survival, with the humans being equated with the *earth*. The land generates the means of survival and as well complicates human existence by the struggle for its ownership that follows. The central struggle in the narrative as Henshaw reveals above is the struggle to possess the earth. This narrative line is the same as that found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* where ivory tend to take the place of oil. In all, the text attempts the question of being using language, from the knowledge that "language [is] the condition of emergence of the human form as *man…"* (Akwanya, "Heidegger, Poetry, and the Call of Being" (1).

CONCLUSION

The question of tragedy as we have shown can be resolved by a study of the econometrics of petroleum exploration and the environmental pollution that result from the same. It is revealed that this leads to a complex of social relations which we have identified to be tragic in orientation. From Zaq's and Rufus' futile search for truth to the militants and the military who are negotiating different aspects of existence, we find that tragedy is one way of understanding the characters. Defined by Arthur Miller as the total compulsion by a man to exonerate himself justly, tragedy figures as the condition of most of the characters in Habila's *Oil on Water*. Everyone is involved in that desire to navigate the bounds of his being and find meaning to his existence. Even the natural environment appears to have been caught within this struggle. This struggle for survival sets the pace for our understanding of tragedy in the narrative. This "total compulsion" is the distinctive marker of the tragic hero, such that with Zaq and Rufus or Boma we recognize the stubborn will to survive against all odds. All these tragic events as we have stated subsists against the backdrop of oil the despoliation that is informed by oil exploration.

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