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## Helon Habila and the Trauma of Disposable People in *Oil on Water*

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#### **Abstract**

Trauma studies is no doubt a burgeoning area of discourse that has captured the literary imagination of academic scholars for a few decades running. This study examined the complex relationship between socio-cultural influences and intimate personal relations portrayed in a trauma fiction as Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Specifically, how does these depictions in Habila's fiction direct the awareness of the catastrophic effects of war, poverty, hostage taking, domestic abuse on the individual psyche? How do traumatised people

respond? To what extent can one theorize trauma studies and ecocritical studies? How traumatized is the physical landscape portrayed in Habila's fiction? The study concludes by insisting that government of nations and relevant international organisations, owe the people the responsibility of intentionally committing to rearticulating and rehabilitating the social conditions, voices; indeed, the lives of marginalized people.

**Keywords:** *Trauma, war, psyche, environment, new slaves*

## INTRODUCTION

The term, “trauma” has been used in many ways and has found a place in several disciplines and lexicons. Traumatic events can include physical and sexual abuse, neglect, bullying, community-based violence, disaster, terrorism, and war. Thus, there is national trauma, historical trauma, psychological/emotional trauma and ecological trauma. The original meaning of “trauma” is wound, but used as such, it only conveys the idea of an injury inflicted on the body. Trauma can be explained as wound inflicted not on the body, but on the mind. Unlike the wound of the body, which is simple and healable, the wound of the mind is often difficult to heal. According to Cathy Caruth (1995) “the wound on the mind is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and it’s therefore not easily available to consciousness until it imposes itself repeatedly through nightmares.” (p. 6). There are people who are often pulled back by unpleasant memories: a betrayal by a best friend, the heartache of the last relationship, that unrequited love, or the loss of the first romantic partner in school. Others find themselves retreating even farther into childhood memories of being lonely, unprotected, denied, uncared for and abused. What is unmistakable is the fact that these realities seem to be repetitive, and individuals continue to feel them. They permeate people’s experiences and stories. But the big question is: do people want to get rid of them? If the answer is a resounding “yes,” then why not?

## LITERARY TRAUMA

Tracing the history of trauma, Joke Dey Mey (2021) submitted that, “Trauma as a field of study goes back to the early twentieth century which is the time when Sigmund Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis. It was Freud who changed the meaning of ‘trauma’ from indicating ‘physical injury’ to ‘psychological injury.’” (p, 34). Ruth Leys (2000) also agreed that “Freud is the founding figure in the history of the conceptualization of trauma” (p. 18). Trauma theory started with Freud’s study of the cause of neurosis in hysterical women whose examination parallels that of French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (as cited in Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, 1995, p. 158). Specifically, Charcot’s carried out an investigation on hysterical women which resulted in the comparison between mental illness and trauma but with concentration on the exclusivity of traumatic symptoms like sudden paralysis, amnesia, sensory loss and convulsions. The study however maintained that these hysterical women were victims of rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse which underlined the agonizing experiences they were subjected to.

On her part, Cathy Caruth’s argument hinges on what happens to a victim as a devastating event, happens so quick that such victim is unable to understand it, but after a while, this event begins to haunt the victim. This directly puts the understanding of trauma as the immediate experience of the wounding, and the belated effects of that wound, manifesting in the form of dreams, hallucination, flashbacks, repeated actions which are the hallmark of trauma theory. Following this, literary works possess the capacity to record events in their belatedness. What Kai Erikson (1995) called, “stories of wounds or blow to the tissues of the mind” (p.183) is what literary trauma discusses. These stories cry out in an attempt to inform the readers of a reality that they do not have access to.

By the late twentieth century, as efforts to further understand the intricate nature of trauma increased, the American Psychiatric Association came out with what was referred to a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of the related symptoms they shared with the theory of trauma. Cathy Caruth’s puts it thus:

*The field of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and sociology have taken a renewed interest in the problem of trauma. In 1980, American Psychiatric Association finally acknowledged the long-recognized but frequently ignored phenomenon under the title, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)”, which included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes (1995, p.3).*

The above details show the connection between PTSD and trauma revealing the imposition on the mind, frustrating events that are inexorably linked with trauma. In postcolonial discourse, the common themes of trauma studies include displacement, dispossession, segregation, political violence, genocide, reparation, rehabilitation, healing, and recovery. Following this, a traumatised individual or group can afterwards experience psychological healing or material recovery. Material recovery, refers to issues such as reparation or remediation, restitution, rehabilitation, the transformation of a wounded political, social, and economic system. Originally situated in the domain of medicine and then psychology, the study of trauma has since 1990, become relevant in literary and cultural studies. Indeed, as trauma has become a prominent theme in life writing and fiction, its studies has emerged as a new field within the humanities.

Prominent among the publications in this field since the 1990s, are such works as Cathy Caruth's essay collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and her monograph, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). These works were subsequently followed by several studies on trauma in fiction, non-fiction, film, and culture. As one writer emphasized, “the growing attention devoted to trauma in academic discourses is closely intertwined with its rising recognition in general and media discourses” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 2). Basically, trauma and memory have emerged as key cultural categories and concerns. Thus, scholars like Luckhurst (2008) has identified trauma in the light of an “exemplary conceptual knot” in contemporary networks of knowledge (p. 14), while Whitehead (2004), on her part, identifies trauma as a “‘memory boom,’ diagnosing widespread ‘cultural obsessions’ with both individual and collective memory” (*Memory*, pp. 1-2). The concept of trauma has expanded beyond its original disciplinary ground and crossed boundaries between various fields and discourses; thus, it has become increasingly, even notoriously, complex, and slippery.

Interestingly, theorists like Cathy Caruth, Donnick Lacapra, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, have engaged Freud's approach as the base upon which they have developed their thoughts on trauma. Sigmund Freud had argued for what he termed “the conscious/unconscious functioning.” (1920, p. 11). Trauma, therefore emerged following Freud's conscious/unconscious functioning--which can simply be explained to mean, the immediate experience of the wounding, and the belated effects of that wound in form of dreams, hallucination, flashbacks, and repeated actions which aggravates or opens up the wound. Therefore, several areas of social concern such as the recognition of the prevalence of violence against women and children (rape, battering, incest), the identification of the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder, as we find in war veterans who fought in wars, the awareness of the psychic scars occasioned by the Holocaust, becomes the points of departure in conceptualising the concept of trauma. The scholars earlier mentioned in this paragraph, argued that trauma is an overwhelming condition which affects the psychology of people who were confronted with an injury—either bodily or psychologically.

Trauma theory states that “traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threats” (Van der Kolk, 1995, p. 23). The way people think, learn, feel, remember, and cope with the world are affected by traumatic experiences which affect the human brain by lessening its capacity. What exactly has literature got to do with trauma? In trying to offer an answer to this question, it is important to highlight what Vickroy observed, “literary and imaginative approaches [to trauma] provide a necessary supplement to historical and psychological studies” (*Trauma & Survival*, 2002, p. 221). Literature, through imagination and forms of symbolization, provide approaches that can effectively express many extremes of human experience that often may not be correctly expressed and comprehended verbally. The fictional worlds offer trauma narratives the much-needed space, where the phenomenon of trauma can widely be explored, despite the multiplicity of perspectives any writer chooses to write from. Put in other words, literary text, and the fictional world in which they are created offers opportunities for nuanced engagements with the subject or theme of trauma. This theme can be personalized, contextualized, or historicized. In addition, the synergy between literature and trauma can produce engaging texts, such texts that can engage readers’ powers of emotional identification, sympathy, and critical reflection. Worthy of note, some of these texts can serve important socio-cultural and political functions.

Following this, trauma writings, especially through the lenses of fiction, is not only “to make terrifying, alien experiences more understandable and accessible” (Vickroy, p. 222), but also to provide a means “of witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people” (Vickroy, p. 222). This position was however amplified by Ann Whiteman, who reasoned that trauma fiction often bring as major theme, “the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” (*Trauma Fiction*, 2004, p. 82); thus, contemporary literary writers within and outside Africa, can now explore the theme of trauma, incorporating its structures into their writings. This linking of trauma theory and literary texts does not only sheds light on works of contemporary fiction, it also highlights the inherent connections between trauma theory and the literary, which have often been overlooked. Although trauma has been explained to mean “an incomprehensible event that defiles all representation” (Leys, p. 253), yet many literary writers have found means of representing trauma in fiction in a way that conveys these challenges, and at the same time, facilitate its understanding.

### **ECOLOGICAL TRAUMA**

What exactly is eco-trauma or ecological trauma? Since the advent of eco-criticism, there has been increased interest, indeed, intellectual attempts, among scholars from different disciplines to attempt a marriage between ecology various disciplines. To this effect, we now find concepts such as eco-sahara, eco-feminism, eco-cinema, eco-linguistics and many others. Among literary scholars, eco-trauma is becoming common especially for those with interest in trauma theory and ecology. By eco-trauma, they refer to the many forms of harm or devastation humans inflict on their natural surroundings and the injuries and losses they (humans) sustain from the polluted and damaged ecosystem. When there is an outbreak of war, natural disaster or death, the adverse effect does not only affect human lives, but non-human life too. Thus, for shell-shocked people, rape victims, the horrors are often not immediate, but afterwards. They undergo what Rob Nixon (2011) calls, “slow violence” (p. 10). In shedding light into the concept of “slow violence” Nixon (2011), noted:

*By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales (p. 2)*

Although it occurs slowly, ecological violence, ranging from climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, oil spills and the environmental aftermath of war, are the greatest undoing of the human race. It is really not peculiar to any region, but a global trauma. However, owing to poor governmental legislation, enforcement and perhaps, remedial responses, the poor regions of the world, those helpless victims of environmental despoliation, are the worst hit. Oil spill or blowouts from oil pipelines destroy large farm and fishing settlements, and the devastating effect of this on the members of those communities is unarguably traumatic.

To further explain the concept of ecological trauma, Chris Onyema (2011) describes it as “political and environmental devastation, as well as the anguish that impacts directly on the masses as victims of political emasculation and ecological pillage.” (“Jungle and Oil Green” p. 205). Onyema’s definition reminds us of one of the unique benefits of the synergy between literature and ecology, which is, “to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (Love, p. 237). So, when there is a “disturbance” of this consciousness, trauma becomes the aftermath. Ecological trauma is often witnessed by the poor masses, the helpless and voiceless who have been compelled to live in the midst of gross ecological pillage or in the face of open environmental devastation even to the detriment of their health and economic well-being.

As expressed in the fictional work under review, the game of double standards and government’s insincerity are commonplace. This practice undoubtedly, leaves the hopes of the masses dashed. Garricks’ *Tomorrow Dies Yesterday*, used as a representational text, among the body of literature of the Niger Delta, is replete with situations where the Niger Delta people are denied developmental projects, job opportunities; their rivers and farmlands are constantly being eroded by oil spill and blowouts, leaving them helpless and hopeless, indeed, traumatised. These and many other traumatic situations are some harrowing experiences of the Niger Delta people. For Cathy Caruth (1995), this kind of traumatic condition cannot be interpreted. She noted that:

*...the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted simply as, a distortion or reality, or as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished, but the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits. (p. 5)*

Put in other words, this “literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” occurs most disturbingly within the very knowledge and experience of the traumatised. Using the above to interpret the condition of the Niger Delta people, as the loss of their farmlands and fishing settlement to oil exploration persist, as their educated and skilled youths suffer employment and loss of opportunities, as poverty remain unabated, as infrastructures are neglected and decay owing to government’s inertia, the more traumatised the people would become in the face of these social

ills. In other words, ecological trauma is the consequence of years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region which has neither translated into poverty reduction nor increased infrastructure development. Sadly, oil wealth has not resulted in the reduction of unemployment for the Niger Delta people, it has not fostered the reduction of social conflicts and the ecology of the region has not fared any better.

### HELON HABILA AND THE DISPOSABLE PEOPLE

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is a 2010 novel published by Harnish Hamilton, UK. As an ecocritical text, its preoccupation is to reveal the corruption, under-belly oil-politics endemic in the Niger Delta region; the reasons behind the continued under development of the oil-rich region and to chart a path for the speedy redemption of not just the region, but the nation's socio-economic life. And like a good work of literature, it has its own peculiarities in content, form, and structure. As Wellek and Warren would express it, "each work of literature is both general and particular; or better, possibly – is both individual and general. Like every human being, each work of literature has its individual characteristics" (p. 7).

In *Oil on Water*, Habila tells the story of the kidnapped British woman by a group of militants in the creeks of the Niger Delta. The search for the kidnapped Mrs. Isabel Floode, her driver, Salomon as well as the "real kidnappers," becomes the point of departure for the lengthy and complicated journey embarked upon by two great journalists: Zaq and Rufus. As this journey progresses, Rufus uncovers the decay, moral degradation, ecological ruins and protracted violence prevalent in Nigeria in general and the Niger Delta region in particular, following years of environmental abuse and neglect.

Using the first journey motif which featured two journalists, Zaq and Rufus as the point of departure, Habila's narrative paints a vivid picture of the trouble and the trauma of *disposable people*. By *disposable people*, we refer to a concept that was first used by Kevin Bales in his book, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (2012). This journey, for Zaq is not just a search for a kidnapped woman, but a journey that will result in different forms of transformation and enlightenment. As they journeyed, Rufus observed "thousands of oil floating on the water" (Habila, p. 227). Basically, this observation is symbolic of the widespread pollution of land, water and air occasioned by "suspended stench of dead matter". (Habila, p. 8). Even as Rufus and his team leader, Zaq proceeded in the journey despite the stench, they were further greeted by "dead bird draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (Habila, p. 8). With this imagery of rot and putrefaction, one can rightly judge that an already sick journalist like Zaq would be further exposed to a polluted environment, which will certainly devastate his already troubled health condition.

In describing the gravity of hazards these polluting conditions pose on the health and safety of the people, it is estimated that "over 100 flares sites in the Niger Delta belch 400 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere annually" (Simon et al., 2014). Beyond the polluted physical landscape, there are poor, less-advantaged people whose living condition is comparable with the deplorable environmental condition. They are the disposable people to borrow Kevin Bales' coinage; an expression used to describe new slaves, who are not like Olauada Equaino or Friedrich Douglas; but slaves who are cheap, needing little care and are disposable. Niyi Osundare offers a graphic illustration of the *disposable people* in his poetry collection, *The Eye of the Earth*:

They too are the earth  
The swansongs of beggars sprawled out  
In brimming gutters  
They are the earth  
Under snakeskin shoes and Mercedes tyres.

They too are the earth  
The sweat and grime of  
Millions hewing woods and hurling water  
They are the earth  
Muddy every pore like naked moles  
--(Osundare, "They Too Are The Earth").

For Bales, although slavery is considered illegal throughout the world today, yet several millions of humans are caught in the web of one of history's oldest and ugly social institutions, known as slavery. And preoccupied with the conditions of poor and down-trodden members of society, Osundare makes a case for these *disposable people* in his poetry. Following accounts available from Kevin Bales' book, the disturbing story of slavery today has confirmed a growing statistic of new slaves, also referred to as disposable people across Africa, Europe, the Americas, Asia, and other parts. Bales engaged in a pathetic investigation into the conditions of "new slavery," one intricately linked to the global economy. For Bales, three interrelated factors that have sponsored the proliferation of "new slaves" across the world:

- *The enormous population explosion over the past three decades has flooded the world's labor markets with millions of impoverished, desperate people.*
- *The revolution of economic globalization and modernized agriculture has dispossessed poor farmers, making them and their families ready targets for enslavement.*
- *Rapid economic change in developing countries has bred corruption and violence, destroying social rules that might once have protected the most vulnerable individuals.*

In Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), an example of "new slaves" or *disposable people*, is Michael, the little son of the old man in the novel. In the dialogue where the old man makes an emotion-laden plea for Zaq and Rufus to take his son along to Port Harcourt to keep the little boy away from vices that commonplace in Irikiefe and its surrounding villages, one can vividly see the desperation and the frustration that would have overwhelmed the man had his plea not granted. The helplessness, the hopelessness and the despondency were visible from the old man's countenance. By closely examining Irikiefe Island and her adjoining creeks, it will be easy to apprehend and justify the fears of this old man. While the social condition he finds himself, has put him forward, if not permanently, as one of the disposable people, this old man has resolved to pull as many strings as

he can, even if it will require his last strength to change, indeed, move his son out of such living condition. Through the dialogue which ensued at that scene where the old man makes a plea for his son to be taken to the city, his fear of the unknown can be substantiated as a possible reason why he wants his son to leave the volatile island:

**Rufus:** *He wants us to take the boy with us when we go back to Port Harcourt.  
You better tell him yourself, old man.*

**Old Man:** *Yes, He no get future here.*

*Na good boy, very sharp. He go help you and your with any work, any work at all, and you too you go send am go school.*

*(Habila, p.36).*

From the dialogue above, the old man, Tamuno puts his son, Michael forward as a deposable person with the hope that through becoming a servant to the journalists, he could get a chance at education, which would serve as springboard or an escape route from the unsafe and extremely poor conditions characteristic of *disposable people*. Hence, when verbal appeal was not producing the expected outcome from the Port Harcourt-based reporters, the little boy who probably had been primed or properly taught by his aged-father, resorts to weeping, an extended means of appealing to pity; of course, weeping did the magic: Zaq was compelled to take the little boy, Michael along to Port Harcourt. Zaq's response to the old man's appeal and Michael's tears was in the affirmative: "I will take him. I'll find a way...Now, you stop crying. Let's go" (Habila, p. 38).

Another category of *disposable people* that peopled Habila's fictional world, *Oil on Water*, are the numerous abductees of the many militant groups whose stock-in-trade is to kidnap oil company workers, and other categories of citizens for ransom. Many of these abductees are either re-sold or killed by their abductors when the ransom is delayed or not paid at all. Their helpless situation leaves them at the mercy of these ruthless kidnappers. Isabel Flood found herself in this condition for a longer period, until she was rescued. For the militants, therefore, this socially condemnable practice of "stealing people", puts them forward as "new slave owners". Additionally, the clandestine nature of their "business" makes them enemies of the law and society. In his response to the question of identifying his group, Henshaw, one of the hoodlums arrested by Major speaks of his own militant group which is different from the one headed by Professor:

*-Does your group have a name?*

*-No! We used to have a name, but no more. That is for children and idiots. We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the earth on which we stand.*

*-Are you with the Professor?*

*-No! I have never met the Professor. We are a different group. (Habila, p. 154)*

From the foregoing, it is clear that the numerous militant groups and their nefarious activities pose a huge threat to lives and property in the region. Some of them are: The Black Belt of Justice, The Free Delta Army and The A.K-47 Freedom Fighters. A disturbing factor among these militant formations is that they are too many and "so confusing" (Habila, p. 31), such that family and friends of the kidnapped, together with security agencies are thrown into further trauma trying to identify "the real kidnappers" (Habila, p. 31).

## CONCLUSION

Slavery is not one of such horrors peculiar with the past; slavery continues to exist throughout the world, even in developed countries like France and the United States. Across the world, slaves work and sweat, build, and suffer. On the other hand, trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. However, a person may experience trauma as a response to any event they find physically or emotionally threatening or harmful. Poor and less-privileged people often feel overwhelmed, helpless, shocked, or have difficulty processing their experiences. This sometimes pushes them to make themselves available as objects for use by the rich or the more economically-stable members of the society. In some ugly situations, these helpless members of society are exposed to hazards, witness barefaced denial of their rights and in some extreme cases, they are compelled to engage in some inhuman activities, which leaves them vulnerable or at the mercy of their “slave owners” or benefactors. To curb this, government of nations and international organisations such as the UN should deploy certain percentage of their tax or revenue generation, towards providing welfare opportunities or social securities for the less privileged members of the society. The channels these amenities or programme can be distributed should be drawn from the less privilege groups, the disposable people themselves, not through any governmental agency.

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