

# Narrating Oil: Witnessing Eco-crisis and Violence in Helon Habila's Petrofiction *Oil on Water* (2010)

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## Abstract

Petrofiction, a term coined by Amitav Ghosh, emphasises oil encounters, explores novelistic and planetary problems, and creates ideologies through the nexus of oil infrastructure and extraction. The Niger Delta has become one of the world's most endangered and polluted eco systems. In this place, lawlessness and criminality manifest themselves in theft and kidnapping, hindering the development of society. Petrofiction, like *Oil on Water* (2010), mainly revolves around the individual psyche and how social structures are shaped by hydrocarbon energy, that marks the advent of Petromodernity, the future, a path away from poverty, and the redemption of a nation. *Oil on Water* (2010) challenges the Western narrative of violence and focuses on the specificity of place and its mediation by histories of economic and political relationships with the world. Helon Habila is considered a literary chronicler of post-independent Nigeria, and his novels are socially conscious, portraying the Nigerian social experience. Habila's petrofiction foregrounds how economic and political relationships have evoked violent ecological transformations inseparable from the Delta's degenerating conditions. *Oil on Water* (2010) highlights the difficulty of generating explanatory narratives that help make sense of places affected by petro-violence, i.e., psychosocial, and ecological repercussions. The use and abuse of energy have significantly impacted the world, and writers like Helon Habila highlight the social and environmental consequences of fossil-fuel energy's industrialisation.

**Keywords:** Petrofiction, Slow-Violence, Witness, Petro-violence, Nigeria.

Nigeria is one of the African nations that evokes the spectacle of public violence and creative imagination. Oil is the substance that has made

consumer capitalism a reality, and features like acceleration, deterritorialization, hyper-consumption, and displacement are mainly due to oil infrastructure development. Oil has created a pathology like "oil dependency", which has become a hindrance to democracy and a reason for civil war and violence in Nigeria, which seems to herald political, institutional, and economic crises (Pirzadeh). "Oil fiction" depicts a petroculture that mainly emphasises three things: firstly, violence and destruction caused by oil; secondly, ways in which culture is affected by oil; and lastly, the dark side of the oil business (Feldner). Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) acquaints one with the cultural dimension of fossil fuel energy and is ubiquitous with revelatory pathos. In the novel, oil links local communities. It keeps them apart as fossil fuel energy disintegrates and displaces the traditional lifeways of the community that used "experiential energies"—attention, conscience, grit, and emotions—to sustain interaction with their local biophysical environments, thereby empowering human lives (Salminen and Vadén). It is the commodified experience that Habila uses as building blocks for individual identities. Consumer capitalism adversely affects the traditional way of life as it changes the material conditions of people and their spiritual foundations. *Oil on Water* (2010), as petro-narrative, talks about the violation of rural landscapes due to oil technologies and the modern world's "addiction" to fossil fuel energy.

*Oil on Water* (2010) involves the search for an