

Full Length Research Paper

Ian McEwan's *Solar* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*: A comparative ecocritical study

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This study juxtaposes Ian McEwan's *Solar* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* to illustrate their areas of convergence and divergence concerning their portrayal of ecological discourse. Attention is paid, to how McEwan and Habila deploy characterisation (particularly of the main characters and female characters) to bring to the fore the overwhelming influence of socio-political and economic issues on ecological or environmental crises in the societies portrayed in the two narratives. The aesthetic and socio-political dimensions of ecocriticism are deployed in this study. In the same vein, the interplay of the socio-political and ethical dimensions has been investigated as well. Habila depicts women as victims of circumstances and females as representatives of problems in the postcolonial context while McEwan portrays them as a bad influence who inadvertently prevent men from saving the planet. Ironically, the same women are projected as objects to be used and discarded (in the same manner the natural world is exploited). In addition, *Solar* illustrates climate change issues and their effects on the planet though with an undertone of sociocentrism while *Oil* concentrates on the environmental vis-à-vis economic and social crises in the Niger Delta. It is also ascertained that what makes both texts invaluable for this study is the political and economic ties between the two major countries they are set in, as one is the former coloniser of the other. Significantly, both narratives are not apocalyptic.

Key words: Aesthetic dimension, socio-political dimension, resource curse, national allegories, sociocentrism, ecocentrism.

INTRODUCTION

Their utopian dream becomes a dystopian reality

The development observed in developed nations comes with a great price: sourcing raw materials which crude oil is a major factor, and while it gives the energy needed, it poses an existential challenge to the future of humanity. One other means to develop a nation is by engaging in deforestation. Africa is home to the raw materials needed

for development. It has crude oil and forests to get timbers. However, the focus of this study is on British and Nigerian societies, drawing inferences from petrol fiction and the climate crisis which necessitates finding alternative sources of energy with the emission of greenhouse gases in mind. These are issues foregrounded in the two primary texts: Ian McEwan's *Solar* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (Habila, 2011; McEwan, 2010). Premise on this,

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both postcolonial ecocriticism and dimensions of ecocriticism are deployed for analysis.

The research questions set out to be answered by this study are: how is neo-colonialism affecting not just the people but also the environment? To what extent is *Oil on Water* postcolonial ecocritical writing? How accurate has the study demonstrated the hypocrisy of the West towards Africa with the juxtaposition of the two novels? The English and the Nigerian societies share common grounds. There would not have been a country called Nigeria without the British government, based on the history of colonialism, though the connection began earlier during the pre-Nigeria/slavery era. There has been a paradigm shift in the contemporary postcolonial literary discourse in Africa. The focus is shifted from what Europe had done during the colonial era to how the same Europe continues to control Africa's economy- neo-colonialism, a new form of colonialism. This exploitative nature of the bilateral relationship between the first world and the third world countries has a profound impact on the flora, fauna and aquatic world of all parties involved. This is what *Oil on Water* portrays.

Aside from the socio-political and economic connections between the settings of the novels, they have also been written in the same century and both works portray ecological issues more realistically than the apocalyptic writings of the 'calamitists', as McEwan coins it.¹ Unlike some fictional works that suggest a world already destroyed by flood, ice or one already plummeted by atomic bombs, *Solar* and *Oil* illustrate nineteenth and twentieth centuries' societal issues which contribute to climate problems.

It is ascertained in this study that there is hypocrisy in the approaches of the British government towards the climate change discourse. Juxtaposing McEwan's and Habila's narratives justifies this position: the same government that is concerned about the emission of greenhouse gasses to the atmosphere and demands that physicists in the United Kingdom find sources of clean energy as portrayed in *Solar*, is busy, by proxy, causing oil spillage in the Niger Delta of Nigeria and damaging the environment as depicted in *Oil on Water*. Buell (1995) calls this 'environmental doublethink' and 'split consciousness.' He explains that though citizens of developed nations desire greenery in their surroundings, and often ignore warnings about the toxic waste, they are 'relieved when the incinerator gets built in the less affluent and politically weaker county fifty miles downwind'.² And the local agencies that have made these nefarious acts against the ordinary people and the environment possible are the Nigerian government and

the militants.

The gap this study fills is that although many critical works have already been written on ecological issues in the west and the Niger Delta, none has demonstrated in comparison the various socio-political, economic and ecocritical problems that pervade the two societies. This study also brings to the fore a more realistic perspective on climate problems beyond the apocalyptic consciousness created by the 'calamitists.'

SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVELS

The narrative, *Solar*, begins with the central character - Michael Beard's marital life, introducing him and his destined-to-end marriage with Patrice. Prof. Beard is a one-time winner of the prestigious Nobel Laureate Award for his discovery in Physics entitled: 'Beard-Einstein Conflation.' He achieves this at a youthful age and lives on past glory. He is portrayed as a failure in both his profession and marital life after two decades of being unproductive in his career and has had four divorces. He is also the embodiment of controversy on gender discourse and climate change. He is satirised extensively and can be seen as a man of multiple dimensions: a flirt, a cuckold, a climate denier turned climate change advocate, irresponsible, a cheat, a subject of ridicule, a buffoon, a coward, full of himself, ignorant, arrogant, an unrepentant misogynist, etc.

Beard has been married five times. His last marriage, with Patrice, a beautiful younger woman, becomes calamitous and it is the beginning of his end. Patrice discovers that Beard has an affair with his colleague, and she is sad about it. She begins seeing Tarpin, a builder who helps them with some construction work at home as a payback. She does this without any remorse and tells Beard about her escapade. This is the first stage of failure of Beard's fifth marriage. Surprisingly, he becomes more fascinated with Patrice after learning of her infidelity.

It is too late; there is no way to remedy what has been destroyed. Beard cannot believe that he is a cuckold. Patrice is seeing another man- Aldous, a post-doctoral researcher at the Centre that Beard heads after she left Tarpin for being violent. Tarpin threatens Aldous for taking Patrice from him. Beard gets back from a journey one day to find Aldous in his house. In the same scene, Aldous accidentally dies in his house, having slipped and hit his head against the wall. Beard capitalises on Tarpin's threat, which Aldous relates with him while they talk before his death. He will not be responsible for Aldous' death and then he places one of the tools Tarpin forgets in his house close to the lifeless body of Aldous. He sneaks out of the house since Patrice, his wife, is not around to witness it. Being that Patrice is aware of Tarpin's threat, she testifies against Tarpin. Tarpin is arrested for the crime and sent to jail for seven years.

Beard claims ownership of Aldous' patent which was to

¹ Mick Brown, 'Ian McEwan Interview: Warming to the Topic of Climate Change', *The Telegraph*, (2010) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7412584/Ian-McEwan-interview-warming-to-the-topic-of-climate-change.html>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

² Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination, Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, (London, Harvard University Press, 1995), p.4.

create solar energy and this does not end well for him. He chooses a partner to work with him on the project in South America. Tarpin takes his pound of flesh from Beard who inadvertently sends him to prison for an offence he did not commit. He destroys the solar panels of the project Beard hopes would help him to become an accomplished physicist once again.

Oil on Water depicts the lives of the people of the Niger Delta and their struggle for survival during the most critical period of Nigerian history. It was not the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956 but the challenges associated with the lack of good management of it that makes oil a 'resource curse'. It gives the nation wealth but takes away peace and tranquillity from the people of the Delta region. Rufus, one of the two journalists contracted by Mr Floode to help find the militant group that kidnaps his wife, Isabel Floode, is the narrator. They are not the first to be sent on such a mission as later revealed. The journalists who last attempted were killed, and this makes it a daunting enterprise for both Zaq, an older journalist, and the young Rufus. Despite the thriller-like plot, it is an 'elaborate investigation of the ways the oil production has negatively affected the region's environment and population.'³

During their journey to the jetty in search of Isabela and her abductors (a group of militants headed by Professor), both Zaq and Rufus meet other characters whose lives also inform the outcome of the narrative. For instance, they meet a boatman, Tamuno and his son, Michael. Tamuno serves as their tour guide on his boat as he takes them everywhere without expecting any financial gain other than for them to take his son, Michael, to the city. He wants Michael to have an education and a bright future but he is sure that it is a pipe dream in their present locality because many young boys end up joining the militants, only to be eventually killed by the Nigerian soldiers or die by fire during pipeline vandalism. We can read hopelessness in Tamuno's request. (Feldner, 2018: pp. 35-37).

Zaq and Rufus, his former student, also meet Chief Ibiram. He narrates to them how they end up living in a small village compared with the paradise they once occupied. He tells them how his people are considering selling their ancestral lands because oil has been discovered there and for the money promised by the oil company. However, Chief Ibiram's uncle is the Chief of Yellow Island and his insistence on not selling the land in the village he heads leads to his arrest by the Nigerian military and the eventually concealed death – he was killed in their cell but not without coercing him to sign the contract that gives away the whole village to an oil company.

They meet Doctor Dagogo -Mark in a camp for the Nigerian soldiers and where they keep their prisoners.

The Major in charge of the camp sees any straying youth as a militant, the same way he arrests Tamuno and Michael and calls them militants. First thing in the morning, he instructs his boys to file them outside and bathe them with petrol in mockery of their cry for the ownership of the oil. Doctor Dagogo narrates his ordeal in a village where he was posted to replace a retired doctor. He tells them how oil is discovered and the people are jubilant. Their lifestyle changes in a euphoric manner that they attach so much to the 'orange light' produced by the flares at night. (p.91) Within two years, things turn bad for them as their river water becomes toxic and livestock and humans begin to die. Their utopian dream becomes a dystopian reality. Despite medical research evidence sent to the oil companies and the government, nothing is done to help the people.

At the end of the narrative, Zaq does not make it back to the city because he suffers from a terminal illness – dengue fever. He prefers to die and be buried in Irikefe, the village where there are priests and worshippers of water. Rufus locates Isabela, who escapes with the help of her former driver, Salomon and they are hopeful of her return to Port Harcourt but their journey is cut short by the Professor's boys, his semi-skilled soldiers. Isabela and Salomon are to be taken back to their camp and as they need to be sure that Chief Ibiram will not reveal their hideout to the soldiers, they are going to take Michael with them. Rufus, instead, volunteers to follow them. Rufus meets the Professor who sends him to Mr Floode on the ransom to pay and when. Then, Salomon is killed by the militants.

RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEWS

David Malcolm's *Understanding Ian McEwan*, though published before *Solar*, provides an invaluable backdrop to the writings of McEwan and one can identify McEwan as one who experiments with writing and who sometimes adheres to the conventional style of writing of his time. He is also known for representing gender issues in his work as he is convinced that the present world order is patriarchal. McEwan has written a few works before he wrote *Solar*, and the emergence of this work shows his interest in the prevalent ecological crisis in the world. Other critics have critiqued his works more closely.

Firstly, 'A Dirty Hero's Fight for Clean Energy: Satire, Allegory, and Risk Narrative in Ian McEwan's *Solar*' by Evi Zemanek considers the novel a 'risk narrative' (Zemanek, 2012).⁴ He argues that it may be difficult to read ecocriticism into it without considering the events in it as allegories. This is because the private life of Michael Beard, the protagonist, overwhelms the ecological

³ Maximilian Feldner, 'Representing the Neo-colonial Destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*', in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54 (2018), 515–527, (p. 515).

⁴ Evi Zemanek, 'A Dirty Hero's Fight for Clean Energy: Satire, Allegory, and Risk Narrative in Ian McEwan's *Solar*', *European Journal of Literature, Culture and the Environment*, 3 (2012), pp. 51-60, (p.51).

concerns in it. He also points out that McEwan does not depict a dystopian society like many other ecocritical works. Zemanek submits: 'Praised as "the first climate-novel by an author of world-class," the novel's quality indeed depends on its allegorical concept, which solves a great problem of representation when one decides against dramatizing hurricanes and floods.'⁵ In this critical work, he relies on discourse analysis and allegorical interpretation to make certain assertions. He explains that risk and fiction have an affinity. While the former relates to the 'lack of secure knowledge and speculation', the latter exists in the realm of probability instead of reality.⁶

Zemanek's use of a metaphor such as what he calls 'risk narrative' though limiting and self-imposing, is useful to the course of this study. He has simply critiqued *Solar* as Astrid Bracke expected. Bracke's (2019) position on reading environmental discourse into certain works which do not explicitly discuss it, is also salient in this study. Seeing beyond the surface is central to this study as it intends to illustrate beyond the life of Michael Beard in tandem with ecocritical focus, it will consider, for instance, how women are depicted in the novel and their impact on the struggle to find a solution to the global problems and at the same time enumerate metaphor of marriage – the union a society needs vis-à-vis the union between humans and non-humans. So, beyond Zemanek's two risk management propositions, this study will emphasise women and marriage and their connection to ecocritical discourse.

Lastly, on *Solar*, Ilany Kogan explores the narrative from a psychoanalytic perspective. In his article entitled: 'Ian McEwan's *Solar* Through a Psychological Lens',⁷ he illustrates the causes of certain effects in Michael Beard's life alongside the lives of other characters like his mother. One would have thought that Kogan would begin his exploration with Michael Beard, instead, he picks his mother, Angela Beard. He makes a very assertive point about her psychological well-being that hinges on her promiscuous lifestyle. She tells young Michael, at age seventeen, in what seems like a confession on her deathbed, that she had a series of affairs in the last eleven years and that is the only reason she has not been sad with her life. Kogan puts it this way: 'Angela used promiscuity to flee depression and fragmentation, trying in this way to save her precarious psychic existence.'⁸

He suggests also that the lives of Michael's parents affect his life. His mother withdraws her love from her husband and becomes a maniac who then tries to live on by having a series of affairs and that his father who is traumatized from the experience of war and who decides to have a life of tranquil and works as a local solicitor. He

concentrates on his car and roses during the weekend. He is unable to love his wife and son and according to Kogan (2012), impacts Michael as he is unable to have a stable love life and afraid to be a father. This study needs to illustrate the impact of Michael's mother on his life.

On *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila does not have the same literary recognition because of the comparative length of McEwan's writing career. He does not have a monograph written on his works yet. He began writing with a short story collection (Prison Stories 2000) which won the Caine Prize in 2001) just as in the case of McEwan and then published his first novel *Waiting for an Angel* (2004). His second novel, *Measuring Time*, came five years before he wrote *Oil on Water*, his third novel, in 2010, the *Chibok Girls* (2017) and lastly, *The Traveller* (2019). It is important to bear this in mind as we consider the various critical work *Oil*.

To begin with, 'Exploring Ideational Metafunction in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*: A re-evaluation and redefinition of African Women's Personality and Identity through Literature' by Léonard A. Koussouhon explores the narrative using one of the linguistic approaches to literary texts. Koussouhon's focus is on how Habila portrays women in the novel, and he does so by deploying ideation metafunction theory, one that shows how 'transitivity analysis of a fictional text explores how the authorial ideology is encoded therein. This function construes human experience through language, by making sense of "reality".'⁹ He considers 'womanism,' an African American concept of feminism, a more subtle type that rather considers the important and complementary roles of both men and women in society than viewing the sexes as at war.

Although Koussouhon (2015) uses quantitative analysis to generate his results, he brings to the fore a similar outcome one would have arrived at should the qualitative method had been used. Like Zemanek and Bracke, he uses language to derive his positions on *Oil* and illustrates extensively, the relationship between men and women in Africa. He concentrates on the equitable treatment of women by men which makes his work more of a feminist study rather than an ecofeminist analysis. In this study, however, women are not just considered for the inequality that pervades African society but put alongside nature.

Moving on, 'Literary Militancy and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*' by Sule Emmanuel Egya¹⁰ analyses the novel from an ecocritical stance. To Egya, a tripartite system of ruination is responsible for the literary militancy in the

⁵ Zemanek, p.52.

⁶ Zemanek, p.53.

⁷ Ilany Kogan, 'Ian McEwan's *Solar* Through a Psychoanalytic Lens', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 60 (2012), 1299–1313 <DOI:10.1177/0003065112465470> [accessed 20 October 2021].

⁸ Kogan, p.1300.

⁹ Léonard A. Koussouhon, 'Exploring Ideational Metafunction in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*: A re-evaluation and redefinition of African Women's Personality and Identity through Literature', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 4 (2015) 129-136 < <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v4n.5p.129> > [accessed 20 September 2021], (p.130)

¹⁰ Sule Emmanuel Egya, 'Literary Militancy and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*', *Research in African Literatures*, 48 (2017), 94–104 <<https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritile.48.4.07>> [accessed 25 October 2021].

Niger Delta Literature and as depicted in *Oil on Water*. These individual bodies – ‘the multinational oil corporations, the federal soldiers and the local militias who call themselves militants’ - are responsible for the emerging consciousness in literature.¹¹ ‘Literary militancy emerges as a discourse force to confront this system of ruination, condemning the aforementioned agents of destruction.’ He prefers to use the term militancy rather than the common one, ‘literary activism’ because, according to him, it better ‘captures the sense of potential force and aggression in what I see as the metaphorical belligerence deployed by the writers.’¹²

These writers who have devoted their imagination to the emancipation of the people of the south-south/Niger Delta have been projecting how the multinational oil corporations in collaboration with the insensitive Nigerian government have been despoiling the region as they go ahead with their oil drilling. They have denied the people access to their means of livelihood, which is primarily fishing, with oil spillage, which has killed the animals in their waters. To resist this inhumane treatment from the government, an agitating civil movement rose to challenge them but with the force being used by the government instead of doing the right thing, radical militancy began, and they are also causing as much damage to the environment as do the oil corporations. Egya (2017) considers these three agents of destruction dangerous to the peace and tranquillity the people of this region deserve.

Senayan Olaoluwa’s ‘Dislocating Anthropocene: The City and Oil in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*’ (Senayan, 2020)¹³ illustrates the events in the Niger Delta region with an important term in ecocriticism: the Anthropocene. From this paper, one can understand that the ‘Anthropocene marks the geological period of the pre-eminence and critical influence of the Anthropos, of the human being, which begins to mix with and in some cases perhaps even takes precedence over natural transformations.’¹⁴ What this implies is that unlike the previous transformation the planet had experienced which was associated with nature changing course, this age of change is not natural but caused by human technology. He offers also that the understanding of the Anthropocene should enable humans to have the ethical defence which should have been used to leverage the survival of the natural world and its inhabitants but as this ethical stance is jettisoned, the world is beginning to experience the consequences.

Olaoluwa considers cities as metaphors in his analysis of *Oil on Water* and the Anthropocene. There is a need for oil in cities and other urban areas and this has led us to the ‘modern world’s catastrophic addiction to fossil

fuels.’¹⁵ Oil is needed in the economic engine that propels the development of these cities and notably, decisions about the lives of the people in the rural areas are determined there. However, the people in the rural areas have also decided to migrate to the cities and in this case, Port Harcourt, which is coveted by Chief Ibiram and the old man that asks Zaq and Rufus to take his son Michael along with them. They believe that the city will provide a better life for them and hence should move there. Unfortunately, this invariably means that the city will consume their former local habitat completely. It is one of the effects of the Anthropocene. Lastly, Olaoluwa considers the local dwellers who have remained and are not able to survive because they have no means of surviving:

*We empathize with a group of rural dwellers whose predicament has been worsened by the overwhelming impact of fossil fuel energy-motivated exploration and conflict. The abundance of crude oil means the ubiquity of exploration that includes prospecting, gas flares, ubiquitous pipelines for which humans are violently dislocated for their installation, to say nothing of the pollution and contamination that leave an entire community drifting on stilts.*¹⁶

The next critical exploration of *Oil on Water* is ‘Rape of a Nation: An Eco-critical Reading of Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*’ by Solomon Adedokun Edebor.¹⁷ Like Olaoluwa has done with his work as discussed above, Edebor also concentrates on the exploitative nature of the modern economy dominated by a few people in the world and determining the fate of many others. He points out that what Habila has done with *Oil on Water* is to raise the level of consciousness of the masses to the prevalent damage being done to the planet. The Niger Delta struggle has been fuelled by the tripartite system of ruination noted in previous paragraphs, Edebor (2017) asserts that Habila fails to proffer any tangible solution.

The last critical work on *Oil on Water* is a broader spectrum deployed by Maximilian Feldner in ‘Representing the neocolonial destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*.’¹⁸ To Feldner (2018), although Nigeria is officially declared independent, the current economic and socio-political situations prove that it is undergoing a recurrence of colonialism in a disguised form. He exposes every effort of the far North to continue to make Africa underdeveloped with different policies and their engagements with the people. The idea of giving aid to African countries is a projection of a primitive world

¹¹ Egya, p.95.

¹² Egya, p.94.

¹³ Olaoluwa, Senayan, ‘Dislocating Anthropocene: The City and Oil in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*’, *ISLE*, 27 (2020), pp. 234-267.

¹⁴ Senayan, p.234.

¹⁵ Senayan, p.239.

¹⁶ Senayan, p.241.

¹⁷ Solomon Adedokun Edebor, ‘Rape of a Nation: An Eco-critical Reading of Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*’, *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 6 (2017), 41-49 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v6i9.983>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

¹⁸ Maximilian Feldner, ‘Representing the Neocolonial Destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2011)’, in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54 (2018), pp. 515 - 527.

that needs help to survive, and this undermines the true situation which is that the western world has continued to exploit Africa's natural resources, just as they have done during the colonial era. He also elaborates on how militancy in the region caused by the neglect of the government has contributed to the menace confronting the people, as Edebor highlights. Feldner (2018), however, does not think that Habila needs to proffer solutions as Edebor raised:

However, it is questionable whether the novel actually aims to provide viable answers for Nigeria's troubled state. Rather, Habila uses his fiction to debate the political efficacy of writing, providing "reflections on the uncertainties of how writing could ever help to remediate the Niger Delta" (Medovoi, 2014: 23).¹⁹

Egya, Olaoluwa, Feldner and Edebor take the discourse deeply into postcolonial ecocritical concern. Egya illustrations on the tripartite system of ruination will be deployed in the analysis of *Oil* in this study though to cover another perspective on it. Oluwaoluwa uses Anthropocene to discuss megacities like Port Harcourt and Lagos and the role they play in deplorable conditions in the rural areas of the Niger Delta. For Feldner, despite the declaration of independence for Nigeria, it remains dependent economically and this he said is caused by the new form of colonialism. Lastly, Edebor's position on *Oil* is not different from the other three. They are simply concentrating on how both humans and nature are exploited by the world powers. This study is designed to trace the source of this tripartite system, which seems a motif in the pre-colonial period. It will establish beyond doubt that exploitation in neo-colonialism is a product of slavery. Also, it deploys socio-political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions in its analysis and *Oil* has not arguably been approached in this manner.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative analysis is deployed, and data are sourced from the existing body of works in ecocriticism, and secondary materials on the primary texts, most of which are available in both physical and online libraries. Considering the focus of the study, which is to juxtapose the two primary texts, a simultaneous comparison is done – both are referenced together. In the same vein, this study also illustrates not just the subject of both texts but also their forms and this also contributes to the findings.

THEORETICAL ANGLE AND ANALYSIS

As an ecocritical study, aesthetic dimension ecocritics critique a text with the intent of discovering ways in which it creatively becomes useful in redefining, ecologically, the model of humanity and human culture. The focus of the aesthetic dimension critics will not only be on how a

text was written but also how the aesthetics of the text have helped to instil ecological consciousness in the readers. In this regard, *Solar* and *Oil* were written by two social commentators, and they have shown how an ecocritical narrative should be and what it should be about. To begin with, McEwan's and Habila's novels have complex plot structures, and it is, for this reason, *The New York Times Book Review* describes the former as 'the clockmaker of novelists, piecing together the cogs and wheels of his plot with unerring meticulousness' (Heller, 2005).²⁰ More significantly, the narrative points of view of the narratives set the tone and the resolutions in the two novels. McEwan's omniscient narrator points towards global issues while Habila's work depicts specificity – a region in Africa's most populous nation. i.e., one deals with global warming and the other deals with a specific environmental crisis.

McEwan deploys a third-person omniscient point of view. This type of narrator is perceived as one that 'knows everything that needs to be known about the agents, actions, and events, and has privileged access to the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motives.'²¹ The character of Michael Beard can easily be understood because his inner and outer attributes are narrated through the lens of the all-knowing narrator. M.H Abram opines that an intrusive narrator passes judgement on the characters, which can be subjective.

Instances in *Solar* demonstrate the position maintained above and this enhances the reader's judgements of each character starting with Beard to Patrice, Aldous, Tarpin, and all the characters present at the fjord. For instance, when Beard contemplates the crisis that has just befallen his fifth marriage, the narrator reveals:

He needed to cease needing her, but desire was not like that. He wanted to want her. One sultry night he lay uncovered on the bed and tried to masturbate himself towards freedom. ...and his fantasy was continually interrupted by Tarpin, who like some ignorant stagehand with ladder and bucket, kept wandering onto the set. (McEwan, 2010: 7)

The omniscient narrator brings the secret life of Beard to the fore. He thinks of a way to pleasure himself on the island of loneliness Patrice maroons him on and each time he attempts to do anything of interest to him, he thinks of Tarpin, the man being used to replace him. Evidence of his perturbed state of mind is present here: 'What impressed him was his ability to think of nothing else. When he was reading a book, when he was giving a talk, he was thinking of her, or of her and Tarpin'. (*Solar*, 8) It does not take the narrator long before judgments are passed on all Beard's actions, leaving the readers with little or nothing to ponder on.

²⁰ Zoe Heller, 'Saturday': One Day in the Life', *The New York Times Book Review* (2005) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/20/books/review/saturday-one-day-in-the-life.html>> [Accessed 4 October 2021].

²¹ M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th edn (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012), p. 301.

²¹ Abrams and Harpham, p. 302.

¹⁹ Feldner, p.520.

Further on characterisation, Brown (2010) interviewed McEwan and aside from Brown's personal view on it, McEwan suggests that *Solar* is particularly about climate change and some human players have not reached a consensus on it. The 'deniers' who say that man-made global warming is a myth; the 'sceptic' who wants to see data before believing; the 'warners' who keep raising concerns and lastly the 'calamitists' who project an apocalyptic world. McEwan describes himself as a warner because he feels the data available are enough to be concerned about.

In the above interview, he identifies four 'players' whose positions matter in what happens to the planet in the present time and the future. Where does Beard fall among these four categories? Is he an outright denier? Or is he a sceptic who will change his mind with the right data? Or like his maker (McEwan), is he a warner? And last but not least, is he a calamitist? The omniscient narrator reveals that Beard is a sceptic. He is aware of the data available about climate change:

And of course, he knew that a molecule of carbon dioxide absorbed energy in the infrared range, and that humankind was putting these molecules into the atmosphere in significant quantity. But he himself had other things to think about. And he was unimpressed by some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in 'peril'. (McEwan, 2010: 15)

However, in another instance, he is portrayed as a denier as he believes that global warming is 'another beast' created by some people to scare others. 'He also distrusted anyone who routinely referred to "the planet" as proof of thinking big' (McEwan, 2010: 18). This reads like saying he does not believe there is any danger looming over the planet that people should be worried about and hence, he is in denier.

Having considered Beard's characterisation through the lens of the omniscient narrator in *Solar* and its implication on ecocritical discourse, it is pertinent to focus attention on the narrative style employed by Habila in *Oil*. As earlier pointed out, *Oil* is written in the first-person narrative point of view. Abrams and Harpharm (2012) suggest that this narrative style is subjective and limiting: 'This mode, insofar as it is consistently carried out, limits the matter of the narrative to what the first-person narrator knows, experiences, infers, or finds out by talking to other characters.'²² For *Oil*, Rufus is the narrator, and one may suggest why Habila chose him as the narrator. Rufus is a 'son of the soil.' This implies that he has first-hand information about the central idea of the narrative, which is the impact of the despoliation of the Niger Delta region on both humans and the natural world. Arguably, this style proves to be effective because through what is revealed by the narrator, sympathy for the people of the region is garnered. Also, the natural world is for once given attention and finally, *Oil's* activism performs dual functions - being ecocentric and socio-

centric. While Beard needs to travel to the fjord to see for himself, the glacier melting, Rufus does not need to go so far. He is born into the environmental crisis in the Delta. The opening of the narrative sets up expectations that we are about to read what could be an autobiography, though it is fiction. Rufus narrates: 'I am walking down a familiar path, with incidents neatly labelled and dated.' (*Oil*, p. 1.) He understands the terrain. He is himself the evidence of the effect of the 'resource curse' on his people and he has witnessed the rage and beauty of the natural world. The reader sympathises with Rufus and his people – his father loses his job and ends up buying crude oil in the black market to resell. He sets up the entire village on fire one day and ends up in the prison but not without already making his daughter Boma's body, half-burnt, leaving a scar that scares men away from her. She is a victim of the exploitation of the Delta by international oil corporations.

Rufus tries to give a vivid picture of the state of the waters and landscape within the jetty. He recounts: 'Over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fishes or other sea creatures – we were alone.' (*Oil*, 10) He reveals that he writes down what he witnesses in other places they have been to: 'I sat against the wall, and while Zaq fiddled absently with Chief Ibiram's radio I wrote down all that I had witnessed since we left Irikefe yesterday: the abandoned village and the hopeless landscape, the gas flares that always burned in the distance.'²⁴ Essentially, his experiential narrative serves as a revelation of the political, economic and social struggle of the people in the region. And this crusade is adequately received by readers because it reads like an autobiography, as readers are drawn closer to the narrator rather than the writer. It is also suggestive of the fact that Habila, being a northerner, needs to deploy an insider like Rufus to tell the Niger Delta's story. Indeed, it proves to be a valid way to write to convince your audience of what you believe. Readers sympathise with the people of the dystopian setting Rufus paints and readers are likely to be carried away by this sentiment.

Discussing the narrative style of *Oil* further, in Chinweizu's work, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* (1980), he posits that Povey claims that many African novelists are so close to the event they narrate, and this makes their works lack 'artistic distance which is the basis of the writer's art.'²³ (Chinweizu and Ihechukwu, 1980)²³. The study argues that the same plot can be narrated differently and therefore this should not be a critical concern. In *Oil*, we find that Habila tries to exercise this 'artistic distance' by creating a narrator in Rufus. Secondly, the plot of the narrative could be rewritten in another way, but would it achieve the same level of impact this style will have on its audience? The creation of Rufus is a deliberate and thoughtful option for

²² Abrams and Harpharm, p. 302.

²³ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jenie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* (Enugu: ABIC Books & Equip.Ltd, 1980), p. 115.

Habila. Again, his narrator balances the subject, which is to bring to the fore the frustration of the people and the natural world. Rufus gives both parties voices to air their plights.

What is ironic in *Solar* is that though there is an omniscient narrator, the narrative centres on an individual and despite *Oil* being narrated from an individual perspective, it relates to issues about the people. This position is elucidated by Fredric Jameson in his 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.' As a critic of the Marxist political position, he asserts: *All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel.*²⁴

Jameson (1986) suggests here that work like Habila's *Oil* should be read as an allegory – one which says more than it explicitly reveals. The situation should be read alongside it and makes a close juxtaposition with the reality within its social context. He suggests further:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.²⁵

Jameson's exposition implies that Rufus, being the narrator and a major victim of the resource curse, is a symbol of everyone living in the Niger Delta region. *Oil* does explore activism for humans and the natural course. Its portrayal of the collective rather than individualist struggle against the government forces is evidence of African inclusivity and this encompasses all humans and other animals gracing the continent. In its explicit form, Rufus gives room for other characters to share their collective experiences – one reason for this is that the narrative takes the reader from one place to another, showing them what happens to the people that either once lived there or are living there in perpetual horror of what could befall them in the hands of either the militants or the insensitive Nigeria soldiers. On the other hand, delving into Rufus and Zaq's personal lives, we may be tempted to think that their experiences are personal. Unfortunately, there is no difference between their lives and those of their compatriots. They have all been affected by corruption in their government. Hence, they are allegorical elements in this national allegory, *Oil on Water*.

In *Solar*, however, the situation is different. Beard is individualistic. Jameson prefers *situation consciousness* to the more used *materialistic* west to refer to the prevalent socio-economic realities of the capitalist

society. He airs his frustration:

*It strikes me that we Americans, we masters of the world, are in something of that very same position. The view from the top is epistemologically crippling and reduces its subjects to the illusions of a host of fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of the individual experience of isolated monads, to dying individual bodies without collective pasts or futures bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality. This placeless individuality, this structural idealism which affords us the luxury of the Sartrean blink, offers a welcome escape from the "nightmare of history," but at the same time it condemns our culture to psychologism and the "projections" of private subjectivity.*²⁶

Hence, rather than illustrating a collective consciousness of the people in the west, McEwan portrays the life of an individual whose subjective view about global warming cannot proffer tangible solutions to the problems confronting the planet. The inability to be open to other possibilities is another plaguing psychological torment in western society.

McEwan's and Habila's choices have proven critically useful in the central idea they project to their audience. As much as we may pretend not to know that context/culture plays a vital role in the production of any literary work, there will always be a need to make a comparison between texts written in and about different societies. An African worldview largely influences the subject or trajectory of *Oil* while western modernism plays the same role in *Solar*. Jameson concludes: 'And it is this, finally, which must account for the allegorical nature of third-world culture, where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself.'²⁷

'Individualism' and 'national allegory' observed above in both primary texts could be applied to the women's representation of African women in *African Oil* and Western women in *Solar*. This time, we are considering the characterisation of women as deployed by Habila and McEwan. However, what is more sacrosanct to this study is how the characterisation of the women in these novels influences ecocritical concerns in them. In *Solar*, the female characters include Patrice (his fifth wife), Beard's mother (Angela), Maisie (his first wife), Mellissa (his last wife), Aldous' mother, and Darlene (his hidden lover). One character is central to all of them – Michael Beard. The character of Michael Beard encompasses two different but linked personalities: young Michael and older Michael. Angela had the first impact on the life of young Michael and later Maisie Farmer. Others seem to have shared in his later life when he has reached his self-imposed career climax. There is no way these female

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), pp. 65-88, (p. 69).

²⁵ Jameson, p. 69.

²⁶ Jameson, p. 85.

²⁷ Jameson, p. 86.

characters can be discussed in isolation - the narrator entwines them with Michael at various stages of his life.

To begin with, Angela is portrayed as a liberal feminist - as with others like her, marriage is important but must exist as an equal institution. So, Angela remains with Henry Beard, Michael's father, despite his unfaithfulness. The narrative reveals that the marriage remains loveless. 'Early in the marriage, for reasons that remained private, she withdrew her love from him. She lived for her son and her legacy was clear: a fat man who restlessly craved the attention of beautiful women who could cook'. (McEwan, 2010: 194) She needs to make herself happy and the only way she can achieve that is to revenge for what her husband had done. She feels she needs to sleep with as many men as possible and hence has seventeen lovers in the space of eleven years. And while all these are happening, Michael never takes notice of it. 'Young Michael registered no outward hostilities or silent tensions in the house, but then, he was neither observant nor sensitive.' (McEwan, 2010: 195) Angela regrets her actions. Although Michael feels there is no offence committed by her because he feels his mother shows him all the love in the world, she understands the psychological implication of her actions on him. In the latter part of the narrative, we see how he blames his mother for his obesity.

Angela, as it will be observed about Maisie and other female characters, is an archetype of First-world women whose social construct dominated by men's hegemonic nature has made to think individually and independently. Although there have been mentions of Maisie's name before when she is first fully described, she is depicted as a 'dirty girl.' What makes her dirty? Nothing is stated as the reason for such a qualification. She remains faithful to Michael throughout their relationship. Her marriage to Michael fails because Michael is not ready to make sacrifices - he does not understand that he needs to consider his partner in whatever he does. He is rather overwhelmed by his career. His unavailability to do some house chores and unspoken hatred for Maisie's menstruation lead to the end of his first marriage.

Michael Beard's parents' marriage and his first are in contrast. While Angela has a cause to stay in the marriage but finds joy with other men, Maisie does not have the same patience and reason to stay in the marriage. Fast forward to his marriage with Patrice: she acts exactly like Michael's mother. She remains in the marriage and has her affairs outside just like his other three wives after Maisie. This should help to illustrate marriage as a metaphor. There is an emphasis on the individual despite the understanding that marriage is not about one person. It is about self-gratification, and it keeps ruining the unions. Michael is concerned about what gives him joy regardless of how it affects the people in his life. Marriage is not that different from human relationships with nonhumans as projected in *Solar*. It is about human satisfaction regardless of the state of the natural world. As Aldous preaches to Beard, oil and coal

have served us enough and we need to change the sources of energy or earth be damned. Men's sexuality can be akin to humans' never-ending exploration of the planet's natural resources.

The only reason humans are conscious of doing something different is when they realise that they are in danger. Michael wants to explore - makes Maisie subject to him and is not ready to change. Unlike environmentalists of the world who are warning the capitalists of the world about their exploration, having realised that humans have extorted the natural world beyond what it can bear any longer, Michael Beard, like the deniers of global warming, remains unrepentant before he meets Melissa. Her pregnancy changes many things about his life and makes him more responsible, though he begins a secret affair with Darlene.

In *Oil on Water*, women are portrayed differently. They lack the voice and the relative opportunities women in the west have. The female characters who are more relevant to this discourse are Rufus' mother, Koko, Boma, Gloria, Isabel, and Gloria. Contrary to *Solar's* depictions of the women identified as being connected by one man, women in *Oil* are not connected by a man but are connected by one factor - being Nigerian citizens or a victim like Isabel. Many things are attached to either being a citizen of a former colony or being an African woman. More significant is the life of Boma. She provokes unsolicited pity from readers because she is a victim of the 'resource curse.' Men do not find her attractive because she is half burnt by the same oil that should have been a blessing to her and her family. And the only man who is bold enough to make her happy leaves her eventually because he is also affected by the same 'resource curse.' Gloria could have as well lost her life in the crossfire between the militants who take her away from Irikefe and the soldiers on their way.

Two other women whose characterisations also have significance to the plot development of the narrative are Isabel and Koko. James, like Michael, is going to file a divorce with his wife, Isabel, to marry Koko, his driver's fiancée. Isabel wants to save her marriage and rushes down to Nigeria and to the Niger Delta where James works. She becomes a victim of the problem created by her country because the oil company polluting the region and not doing the right thing in the region comes from her country. Hence, Isabel becomes a target to the militants as they believe that the oil company will pay them whatever amount of money they demand. For Koko, she seeks a better life that Salomon, her fiancé cannot offer her. Salomon is a graduate and since he has no job, he becomes a driver to earn a living. What he earns cannot guarantee a relatively good life for himself and the family he intends to have. They are all victims of the corruption going on in the country.

Women's representation in the two narratives has significance to this study. In *Solar*, depicting women as femme fatale is an indictment and it portends the wrong approach to the struggle to find clean energy. The

capitalist or materialistic consciousness does not encourage men and women to be ecocentric in actions. They are seemingly too busy to be preoccupied with the climate crisis – women are as busy with their businesses as men. Unlike women's portrayal in *Solar*, their counterparts in Nigeria are still forcefully subjected to all forms of unpleasant situations in *Oil*. Women are at the mercy of men and the outcome of many things is determined by men. It suffices to suggest that this 'hardship' keeps women in Africa close to the natural world and hence, as the environment is subjected to devastation, women share from it. Hence, Boma, Koko, Rufus' mother, Gloria are victims of circumstances.

Having highlighted the place of women and its importance to this study using the context of the Global south women and Nigerian women, *Solar* discusses global warming and finding a solution to the planet that is in peril. Through Michael, the central issue is brought to the fore – we see how seriously the government in the UK takes the issue of climate change by asking physicists to come up with proposals on how to create green energy, we also see glaciers melting away as Michael and others visit the fjord in Oslo, Norway; we learn the causes of the climate change via Aldous' knowledge as he tells of the danger in continuous use of oil and coal, which when used, causes greenhouse gasses to the atmosphere and we also learn the extent to which the science regarding this issue is politicised.

We learn how certain scientists feel that the planet is not in trouble and that those who raise the alarm do so for political reasons. That is why Evi Zemanek in 'A Dirty Hero's Fight for Clean Energy: Satire, Allegory, and Risk Narrative in Ian McEwan's *Solar*' calls the narrative a 'risk narrative.' He explains his position:

On the other hand, it is a global risk with side effects on humanity that are difficult to calculate. Some of these consequences are already perceptible, but many others still belong to the realm of anticipation, which necessarily requires imagination. Thus, there is a special affinity between risk and fiction: the former rests on a lack of secure knowledge and speculation, the latter, for the most part, stages the probable instead of the real.²⁸

It is suggestive that Zemanek prefers to see *Solar* as a speculative novel whose central idea is based on probability. What he fails to realise is that there is scientific evidence that proves that the ice is melting caused by an increase in the temperature of the earth. Fiction is essentially a verisimilitude of reality and hence, caution must be taken in pushing aside the warnings fictional works deliver about societies. In the words of Michael Beard:

Here's the good news. The UN estimates that already a

third of a million people a year are dying from climate change. Even as we speak, the inhabitants of the island of Carteret in the South Pacific are being evacuated because the oceans are warming and expanding and rising. Malarial mosquitoes are advancing northwards across Europe... Toby, listen. It's a catastrophe. Relax! (McEwan, 2010: 216)

The above excerpt is not some fictional speculation, but facts included in a work of fiction. As an article in *The Guardian* suggests:

This year has provided bitter evidence that even current levels of warming are disastrous, with astounding floods in Germany and China, Hades-like fires from Canada to California to Greece and rain, rather than snow, falling for the first time at the summit of a rapidly melting Greenland. "No amount of global warming can be considered safe and people are already dying from climate change," said Amanda Maycock, an expert in climate dynamics at the University of Leeds (Oliver, 2021).²⁹

Zemanek's perspective cannot be faulted outright because fiction is believed to belong to the realm of probability while history is said to be factual. However, for social critics, *Solar* should be taken as a work that not only evinces the dynamics of human society but one which also demonstrates humans' lapses regarding the global issue – climate change.

Oil on Water is a fictional work that focuses on environmental problems in the Niger Delta. If considered an allegory, it can be seen as a representation of socio-political and economic problems in all third-world oil-producing countries. As Jameson suggests, third-world texts are more national allegories than western texts that focus on individual lives. Therefore, *Oil* relates to prevalent issues in these various countries. However, in proper context, *Oil* depicts the devastation caused by oil drilling in the region and its effects on the people. Unlike *Solar* whose setting is not said to be experiencing the acute effect of climate change, the setting in *Oil* is already plagued by different inhospitable conditions.

Another obvious difference between the two texts is that while the government of one is proactive in finding a solution to the global problems as demonstrated in *Solar*, the government in *Oil* is reductive about the suffering of the people in the region. Ironically, it is the same government in *Solar* that is proactive in its country that is largely responsible for the devastation in the regions portrayed in *Oil*. Nixon (2011) captures this irony in this way:

²⁸ Evi Zemanek, 'A Dirty Hero's Fight for Clean Energy: Satire, Allegory, and Risk Narrative in Ian McEwan's *Solar*', *European Journal of Literature Culture and Environment*, (2012), 51 – 60, <10.37536/ECOZONA.2012.3.1.450>, [Accessed:12/09/2021].

²⁹ Oliver Milman, Andrew Witherspoon, Rita Liu, and Alvin Chang, 'Climate Disaster is Here', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2021/oct/14/climate-change-happening-now-stats-graphs-maps-cop26>> [Accessed on 17/10/2021].

*In the mid-90s, when flaring from Nigeria's oil fields was pumping 12 million tons of methane and 35 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually, it was argued by some that this was the single greatest contributor worldwide to climate change. (In this one regard at least, the oil corporations did not discriminate.) Given this backdrop, the irony was not lost on the Ogoni that Shell was winning awards in Europe for environmentally sensitive conduct north-south greenwashing, par excellence.*³⁰

Lastly, while *Solar* focuses on sociocentrism, i.e., explores social issues more than its preoccupation with climate change, *Oil* heavily remonstrates on condition of the natural world in the region and relates to a social issue – hence it is both socio-centric and ecocentric. *Solar* exemplifies the challenges between building a career and having a successful marital life. Beard is caught in between the two and one is constantly influencing the other. But in *Oil*, the condition of waters and villages and the lives of the people living in the region are discussed. Irikefe is an example as is Abiram's uncle, and their former village is taken over by the oil company by coercion and manipulation. It is noteworthy to also discuss how Dr Dabobo relates the happenings in the village that is lured by the 'orange fire' that burns every night. 'Orange fire' is another nomenclature for 'resource curse'. As the Doctor narrates, it is the fire that releases the flare into the atmosphere, and they are enticed by news of how people who accepted the fire have collected billions of naira. They desire a better life and hence, they clamour for the 'orange fire', which they get and bear the brunt. It brings all sorts of sicknesses to the village and people begin to die.

Conclusion

This study has enumerated the explicit and implicit relevance of both *Solar* and *Oil* in ecocritical discourse which is pivotal to the significance of this work. It has been illustrated that other than the colonial history shared by the setting of the two primary texts, there seems to also be a connection in terms of their socio-political, economic and environmental standpoints. The two narratives are not apocalyptic in focus – they explore more realistic issues in contemporary societies. On the contrary, while *Solar* considers a universal issue of climate change, *Oil* focuses on the experiences of a group of people in connection with oil. Also, McEwan's work depicts the climate change issues from a sociocentric perspective while Habi's work is a 'national allegory.' One other salient issue is hypocrisy or what is tagged 'double thinking'. The government of England in *Solar* is proactive in sourcing for alternative energy, but it

is inferred in *Oil* that, by proxy, they rather connive with the Nigerian government to cause more threats to the lives of creatures in the Delta region. Women in the two societies are not portrayed the same way: they are femme fatale in *Solar* while *Oil* projects them as victims, just like the natural world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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³⁰ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and Environmentalist of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 113.

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