

## Sons of the Soil: Representation of Ecological Masculinity in *Oil on Water: A Novel*

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Accepted version published on 1st May 2026

 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19953458>

### ABSTRACT

The relationship between man and environment has been a topic for critical debate ever since ecocriticism entered the arena of literary discourse. The apocalyptic future of the universe has been seriously dealt with in recent global literature. Masculine hegemony and the toxic effects it unleashed upon nature and environment are well portrayed and exposed by ecocritical readings in general and ecofeminists in particular. Dominance in the name of culture, religion, development, modernisation, etc., must be addressed if we are to save Mother Earth. Hence, it has become imperative that masculine hegemony be replaced by a theoretical praxis that can advance gender equality and environmental justice. Even though the ecofeminist thinkers have thrown light upon the oppressive gender practice of patriarchy, they have ignored the rise of ecological masculinity as a counter force against masculine hegemony. Ecological masculinity is inherently egalitarian, pro-feminist, pro-environmental and progressive in ethos and spirit. This paper reads *Oil on Water: A Novel* by Helon Habila in the light of ecological masculinity. The destruction of the environment in the Niger Delta is presented in the novel within the backdrop of the large-scale oil extraction and the forced evictions of the native communities when oil companies encroach into their villages for drilling. It illustrates the environmental and

human costs of resource extraction in the corrupt, postcolonial Africa in a subtle manner. The paper seeks to analyse the issue from the perspective of ecological masculinity, in relation to the leaders, chiefs, of the village of Ikirefe as presented in the novel, and in line with the first-hand experiences of the two journalist protagonists. Characters like Chief Ibiram and Chief Malabo exhibit conspicuous traits of ecological masculinity. They stand for protecting the environment and the survival of their communities.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Masculine hegemony, ecological masculinity, African resistance, evictions

## **FULL RESEARCH PAPER**

### **Introduction**

The interconnectedness of human life and nature has been a fascinating vantage point for discussion ever since ecocriticism came to the forefront of literary discourse. Furthermore, the devastating consequences of environmental destruction and global warming have necessitated such deliberations. The plundering of natural resources by corporations, the forced evictions of native communities, and their persistent struggles for survival have been major themes of global literature in recent decades. Naturally, ecocriticism has emerged as an ideological weapon as well as a practical solution for the heedless cry for progress and development, even at the risk of the annihilation of the planet. As Cheryll Glotfelty rightly observes in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*:

... if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest, controversy over the Spotted Owl in the Pacific Northwest' a wildfire in Yellowstone Park, medical syringes washing onto the shores of Atlantic beaches, boycotts on tuna, overtapped aquifers in the 'west, illegal dumping in the-East, a nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, new auto emissions standards, famines, droughts, floods, hurricanes, a United Nations

special conference on environment and development, a U.S. president declaring the 1990s "the decade of the environment, and a world population that topped five billion. Browsing through periodicals, you would discover that in 1989, Time magazine's person of the year award went to "The Endangered Earth" (xvi)

She warns that if the greedy developmental activities are not controlled, they will act as a catalyst for the destruction of the planet, leading to the extinction of life on Earth. Ecocritical readings thus pave the way for actions and participatory conservation practices for the survival of nature and the environment. It is the study of the relationship between human beings and the environment, as Glotfelty states. But when analysed deeply, it emerges as a champion ideology in the global political spectrum of environmental studies and cuts across different disciplines ranging from literature to science and technology.

According to Glotfelty, it is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty xviii). In this sense, ecocriticism shows a 'spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis' (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 430). It questions the sagacity of man's idea of development, the ruthless destruction of the earth for natural resources, the uncontrolled wracking of the fossil fuels and the consequent displacement and impoverishment of the local communities, the disregard of the capitalist regimes towards the poor and oppressed, and a lot of other burgeoning social evils. It goes beyond the normal assessment of the social system and, in its critical parlance, includes the entire biosphere, including non-human and inanimate objects. As a result, ecocriticism questions and subverts the predominantly anthropocentric worldview, showing the importance of a more egalitarian standpoint for discussing the world's real issues and for tracing 'better ways of imaging' (Buell 2) in language and literature.

Almost all the ecocritical studies have analysed the role of toxic masculinities in the destruction of the environment and the establishment of a patriarchal social order in which gendered discrimination plays a key role in the sustenance of the system. Ecofeminists rightly point out the parallel between the oppression of womanhood and environmental destruction in this patriarchal social system. They demand the demolition of this domination if we desire to establish an egalitarian social order and to protect the natural environment. Dominance in the name of

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culture, religion, development, modernisation, etc., is to be addressed and tackled if we have to save 'Mother Earth'. Françoise d'Eaubonne examines the environmental costs of 'development' in her epoch-making work *'Feminism or Death'* and identifies women as the subjects of change (d'Eaubonne 2). It is a fact that most of the environmental problems are the direct outcome of the hegemonic oppression of masculinities upon nature. Thus, ecofeminism becomes a vital critical approach in the ecocritical arena. Toxic masculinities are explained and exposed by the ecofeminists in order to revolt against the social inequities and to suggest alternatives for a better future.

Masculine hegemony has been identified as the chief reason for all these social evils, as put forward by the ecofeminists and profeminist ideologists. From the perspective of Raewyn Connell, the hegemonised masculine ideal is "... the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy (or male domination) which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." (Connell, 77)

### **Ecological Masculinity as a Counter Force**

Hence, it has become imperative that masculine hegemony be replaced by a theoretical praxis that can advance gender equality and environmental justice. Even though the ecofeminist thinkers have thrown light upon the oppressive gender practice of patriarchy, they have ignored the rise of ecological masculinity as a counter force against masculine hegemony. Ecological masculinity is inherently egalitarian, pro-feminist, pro- environmental and progressive in ethos and spirit. As Bob Pease points out:

profeminist men are involved in reconstructing or exiting dominant forms of masculinity may be able to envisage new non-oppressive ways for men to relate to nature, as they discover new ways for men to relate to nature, as they discover new ways to relate to women, other men and themselves (Pease, "Men, Masculinities and Disaster" 33)

Ecological masculinity is grounded in profeminist theory. It calls for a radical transformation from hegemony to democracy, from daring to caring, from dominance to empathy and from destruction and devastation to conservation and preservation. *In Masculine Identities: The History and Meanings of Manliness* (2012), Herbert Sussman elaborates on the profeminist attitudinal change of the contemporary patriarchal social system:

Indeed, contemporary men have adopted other traditionally feminine qualities, in part due to changing economic conditions in which women assume the formerly specifically masculine identity of breadwinner. Many men now take on the role of nurturing mother in the domestic sphere, a position historically assigned to women. Men now share child-rearing duties with their wives, and some men have become full-time fathers. ... The man now nurtures. Fathers can, and are expected to, express warmth and unconditional love for their children. (156)

The profeminist approach is very much essential in the politics of ecological masculinity, by which men get true awareness and understanding of the dominance of patriarchy upon the marginalised sections, including women and the environment. As Pulé' and Hultman explain:

Profeminists position themselves as bulwarks against these expressions of sexism, advocating the need for men to acknowledge their structural privileges, eliminate their internalised superiority and advocate gender equity. Profeminist publications, forums, organisations and support groups collectively facilitate a cross-section of behavioural and paradigmatic reforms for men and masculinities, aiming to achieve alternative and post-patriarchal forms of masculinities that treat women and non-binary/gender queer people as equals and set up systems in support of that goal" (69).

A transformation to a post-patriarchal, empathetic masculinity is needed to cultivate environmentalism among men. Moreover, the profeminist standpoint allows men to experience an emotional freedom to express their feelings. In a way, both sexes benefit from man's metamorphosis from hegemony to caring. Ecological masculinity exhibits compassion beyond gender differences and societal inequalities, and calls for constructive, sustainable practices in environmental protection. It fights against all sorts of capitalist exploitations and offers an insightful critique of corporate greed and corruption.

### **Ecological Masculinity in *Oil on Water: A Novel***

This paper reads *Oil on Water: A Novel* by Helon Habila in the light of ecological masculinity. The destruction of the environment in the Niger Delta is presented in the novel within the backdrop of the large-scale oil extraction and the forced evictions of the native communities when oil companies encroach into their villages for drilling. It illustrates the environmental and human costs of resource extraction in the corrupt, postcolonial Africa in a subtle manner. The novel portrays

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the struggles of local communities against the ruthless attacks of Western multinational companies. The main plot of the text is the abduction and the search for a hostage. At the same time, environmental degradation and the conflict between the militia and Nigeria's federal forces provide the novel's backdrop. It subtly presents the exploitation of the land and water of the Niger Delta by the oil companies and the pathetic plight of the indigenous people who have lost their livelihood due to the burgeoning invasion of the corporate giants. Even though the novel moves back and forth in space and time, giving readers the impression of inconsistency, it is actually a linear chronicle of the ruthless invasion of the oil companies into the land, backed by their own governments. Thus, the novel becomes an investigation into the socio-political history of oil extraction and its impacts on the people of Nigeria. Maxmillian Feldner comments on the novel that, "it is actually an elaborate investigation of the ways the oil production has negatively affected the [Niger Delta's] environment and population" (Feldner 515)

Jim Davis, the Africa Partnership Coordinator, in his article, "Ecological devastation of the Niger Delta by oil extraction should be a concern to the whole world" (2021), speaks about the devastation of the Niger Delta due to the oil exploration activities:

One such place experiencing these phenomena is the Niger Delta in Nigeria, where residents benefit proportionately less from the global neoliberal economy while suffering disproportionately from the ecological damages from oil extraction. The most concentrated freshwater wetlands and aquatic ecosystem in West Africa is found in the Niger Delta, which supports the life and livelihoods of many local communities and the West African economy. This significant ecosystem is put at serious risk by the impacts of large-scale oil extraction. Satellite data have confirmed substantial wetland degradation caused by decades of forest loss. (Davis 1)

It is worth noting that there are 9 oil exploration states in the Niger Delta region, encompassing 185 local governments and 800 communities from 12 major ethnic groups, with a population of more than 30 million. (Antoniette Twum 2019). This Delta region is home to numerous aquatic and terrestrial animals and plants of great ecological importance. Oil exploration has adversely affected the existence of many rare species of life forms due to incessant drilling, oil spills, and gas flares. It is a pity that one of the world's greatest ecological sites is ruined by the greed for petrodollars.

It is in this context that the ecocritical study of the novel becomes a significant analysis of the Niger Delta in the backdrop of the petrochemical warfare. The paper seeks to analyse the issue from the perspective of ecological masculinity, in relation to the leaders, chiefs, of the village of Ikirefe as presented in the novel, and in line with the first-hand experiences of the two journalist protagonists. Characters like Chief Ibiram and Chief Malabo exhibit conspicuous traits of ecological masculinity. They stand for protecting the environment and the survival of their communities. The two journalists also carry some elements of ecological consciousness. They can be regarded as representatives of environmental journalism, seeking to reveal the hollowness of claims to progress and development. Dr Anders Hansen writes: "News about the environment, environmental disasters, and environmental issues or problems does not happen by itself, but is... produced, 'manufactured', or 'constructed'. (Hansen 72)

Zaq and Rufus are true representatives of this type of journalism because they 'talked about journalists as conservationists... that we scribble for posterity...' (Habla 79). They truthfully convey the extent of the devastation of the Delta to the reading community without any exaggeration or prejudices. The act of journalism is documenting the present for future generations so they may better understand the land's history. Rufus also expresses this sentiment at one point when he describes how the poor indigenous people are maltreated and tortured by the military forces, here represented by the Major and his soldiers. Being a journalist, Rufus cannot look away from the scene even though it is horrible:

I turned away so as not to watch the shock and pain and frustration on the bowed faces as the precious, corrosive liquid touched their skins. The Doctor also looked away toward the water, lost in some detail of the ruined, decomposing landscape. But I couldn't turn my face away for long. I was a journalist: my job was to observe and to write about it later. To be a witness for posterity. I witnessed the stoic and anticipatory posture of the kneeling men. I witnessed the brutal anointing in silence, smelled the reek of petrol hanging in the air, pungent, and I wondered how the men could stand it (Habla 60)

The praxis of ecological masculinity becomes significant in this context, as it embodies the ideals of inclusiveness, care and compassion towards all elements of the ecosystem. Truthful representations of this profeminist ecological masculinity can be seen in the discourse of *'Oil on Water: A Novel'* with some strong suggestions towards the significance of traditional practices of the Nigerian Delta region. For

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instance, the resolve of Chief Malabo and Chief Ibiram represent the major traits of masculine ecologisation. Their characters reveal the real struggles local communities face as they fight neocolonial forces. The anecdote about Chief Malabo in the novel speaks to the pristine purity of their land before the advent of oil companies and subsequent exploration. Malabo's people lived upon the simple pleasures of life until they were intimidated by the corporate forces. Once upon a time, they lived in paradise. It was a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was close-knit, made up of cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters (Habla 42)

Indigenous people live in harmony with the environment, and their traditional religious practices are always eco-friendly, so they do not harm the ecosystem in pursuit of progress and development. The report of the International Labour Office, Geneva (Indigenous Peoples & Climate Change, 2017), clearly shows the importance of indigenous practices in combating ecological catastrophes. It endorses that:

At the same time, however, indigenous peoples are crucial agents of change because their livelihood systems, occupations, traditional knowledge and ways of life are essential for combating climate change effectively. This is particularly so in the case of mitigation efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, foster conservation, sustainably manage forests, enhance forest carbon stocks (such as REDD+), and adapt agricultural practices to climate change. (2)

They live by traditional agricultural or fishing practices and never harm the environment for immediate gain. Certain plants and animals are often regarded as sacred so that there shall not be any vandalism on them. These communities do not want extortionate monetary benefits or any other gains, making it difficult for the capital powers to overcome them. Hence, oil companies employ coercive practices to appropriate the land's natural resources. They offer exorbitant financial benefits to communities if they sell their properties for extraction, as in the case of the Odoni People of the Niger Delta. If the community resists, threats and intimidation will follow. The same thing happens with the community of Chief Malabo as described in the novel.

Chief Malabo represents not only the community of this coastal region of the Niger Delta but also all activists in the resistance against the ruthless oppression of neocolonial powers. Even when the young people consider the benefits of the offer,

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Chief Malabo reminds them of the nefarious outcome that has befallen the other villages that have succumbed to the temptation. He summons their attention to the ecological disasters that occurred in those villages: "Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines" (Habla 43)

Chief Malabo, hence, can be treated as a representative of ecological masculinity because he embodies all its traits, such as care, compassion and the determination to protect the environment through non-violent, peaceful means, even when adversaries resort to violence and death threats. His anecdote also symbolises the extreme hardships the local people are subjected to when corporate powers invade their land in search of natural resources. Chief Ibiram replies to Rufus when Rufus asks whether they are happy here. We left, we headed northwards, we've lived in five different places now, but we've always had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So, your question is, are we happy here? I say, how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home? (Habla 45)

Chief Malabo thus becomes an archetype of resistance against eco-imperialism by the neocolonial forces in general and the oil companies in particular. His story is intrinsically intertwined with the land's ecology. The ecological depredation happening in the Delta is not different from the plight of the people. Hence, the novel equates environmental destruction with people's suffering in its narrative structure, reminding us of the urgency and necessity of corrective measures for the survival of both people and the environment. Sule E. Egya writes about the convergence of these human and environmental problems in the Nigerian texts as "issues of ecology are tied up with the struggles of the people to survive in a heavily militarised environment." (Egya 69). Egya also notes that, "writing about the Niger Delta environment is not just about "the question of the environment suffering alone, but of a people being brutalised because of, and alongside, the environment" (Egya 69).

*Oil on Water: A Novel* also engages in the same discourse on environmental destruction and ranks human rights violations in the name of extracting natural resources. It describes in detail how oil companies occupy the villages with the aid of the military, and how the earth and air are polluted by the incessant exploration, which leads to oil spills and gas flares. Chief Malabo is one among the many activists who fight for justice and who are incarcerated and assassinated by systemic oppression and persecution.

**Author Contributions:** All authors have contributed equally to this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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