

Review Article

Exploring Society Through Literature: A Study of Habila's *Oil on Water* and Emecheta's *the Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

Colonialism has meaningfully participated in the change of many things in African world. From social degradation to environmental change, African society remains politicized by new colonial settings. These settings are built through the colonial order and continue to impact African people's lives. In Nigeria, like anywhere in Africa, social phenomena have changed with the effects of colonialism. The present paper explores "Literature" and "Society" as two foundational social and political figures in the exploration of human life. Buchi Emecheta and Helon Habila's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Oil on Water* (2010) are special works when talking about Women's conditions and sociopolitical realities before, during, and after colonial rule. Through close reading and theories developed in relation to the most relevant themes in these two novels, we seek to explore women's conditions, the consequence of oil production, social change, and social struggle. The present work investigates the dynamic relationships between literature and society, examining how literary texts shape and are shaped by the social, political, and cultural conditions. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives from sociological literary criticism, this research paper underscores literature's role as a mirror and a critique of societal structures, ideologies, and transformations. Helon Habila and Buchi Emecheta give two important representative images of African postcolonial society and politics. They develop in the selected novels African post-colonial social facts in relation to their social and political concerns, more precisely their country, Nigeria. Emecheta explores women conditions while Habila tries to analyze the effects of oil exploitation in postcolonial context. This review is an analysis of social representation of women's conditions and oil production in Africa.

Keywords

Literature, Society, Sociopolitical Realities, Colonial Rules, Postcolonial Black World, Cultural Conditions, Transformations

1. Introduction

Helen Habila and Buchi Emecheta are Nigerian novelists who have written extensively on social experiments. In their novels, the issues of independence, motherhood, social and cultural conflicts and the new challenges of postcolonial Africa are developed. Habila's works explore socio-political realities and human rights issues. Emecheta's works explore the questions of female independence and gender issues. The

present paper is a thematic exploration of society and literature in *Oil on Water* [1] Helon Habila and *The Joy of Motherhood* [2] by Buchi Emecheta.

Chima Igbokwe and Onyemaechi Udumukwu, in their "Language, Polygamy and Motherhood in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*: A Stylistic Critical Approach" [3] examine the relevance of Sociolinguistic Functional Stylistics

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(SFS) in understanding Emecheta's novel. Gender and sexuality are parts of the ideological implications of language in Emecheta's fiction. In "Articulation of Womanism in African Literature: A Reading of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*", [4] Stanley Ordu and Better Odukwu explore the concept of womanism in African literature, specifically through Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. This article is guided by Ogunyemi's womanism theory, which emphasizes the survival and unity of men, women, and children.

"Tale of African Women: Buchi Emecheta's a joy of motherhood" [5] explains discrimination and oppression of women in patriarchal relations in image to gender, and sex with Igbo society. It reclaims that women are silenced and have limited access to social resources. It highlights cultural and religious changes in Nigeria, and shows how women like Nnu Ego suffer dual oppression from colonial rule and patriarchal African society. Teresa Derrickson's "Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context: The Status of Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" [6] provides a profound reinterpretation of Emecheta's novel, shifting the focus from a critique of indigenous Igbo patriarchy to a critique of colonial capitalism and its devastating effects on African women. *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Oil on Water* make powerful post-colonial critiques by exposing the effects of colonialism, gender inequality, and capitalism. Emecheta exposes the erosion of traditional female roles under colonial pressure. The present paper demonstrates the way literature reflects and challenges social issues, shaping identity and inspiring change.

2. The Impacts of Colonialism in Social Conflicts

Colonialism has caused scars on African societies, deeply affecting political, cultural, and social systems. *Oil on Water* and *The Joys of Motherhood* analyze the way these colonial legacies shape family dynamics, gender roles, environmental crises, and national identity across different contexts. On page 11, a historical and cultural context anchors the narrative in a specific Igbo sociopolitical structure. We read on this page "During the time of Nwokocha Agbadi the town had become known as Ibuza, and Ogboli was then one of the villages that made up the town." Ibuza is a real town in present-day Nigeria, located in Delta State. Ogboli is a village and community within Ibuza. This citation is a representation of the town Ibuza and its village structure situating the story within a pre-colonial and early colonial Nigerian context, before the full force of Westernization and urban migration took over. She redefines motherhood in a capitalist and patriarchal system. Emecheta explores colonial rules and economic hardship. The way these two systems force women to migrate from traditional, communal life in Ibuza to isolated, survival-driven urban people in colonial Lagos makes Nnu fight

with motherhood, poverty, and displacement. Buchi puts in light personal and social costs of colonization and gendered segregation.

Nwokocha Agbadi is the traditional Igbo patriarchal order. He marks a contrast between a stable, kinship-based village life and the fragmented, urban existence experienced by Nnu Ego during colonization. Nnu is a feminist symbol caught between African values and colonial economic pressures. This illustrates the degradation of women's roles under modernity. Habila critiques neo-colonial exploitation by multinational oil corporations that continue to control Nigeria's resources, devastating the environment and indigenous culture. Chief Ibiram and journalists Rufus and Zaq demonstrate the ongoing power imbalances and the failure of outsiders to grasp the true depth of local suffering.

The foreign journalists in *Oil on Water* represent the manner Western world consumes African suffering as news. They are detracted observers, unable and unwilling to engage with the full truth. They are interested in only simplified narratives of good versus evil, oil companies versus rebels, without recognizing the nuances and systemic issues. Rufus, a Nigerian (local) journalist, tries to navigate the ethical challenges of his job. He explores the cultural and political background of the Niger Delta crisis better than the foreigners. Western journalists "report" the story, but do not live it, in contrast to Rufus. Zaq says: "Our job is to find out the truth, even if it is buried deep in the earth." Zaq and Rufus seek truth, by how? Who should seek the truth? Is it Western or people living in it? In the context of war, should the journalist be only interested in the truth? Why not in history? The page 114 of "Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context: the Status of Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood*" says: "I drank to make myself insensitive to the accusing ghost eyes in the light's fringes, eyes whose glow seemed to pierce through my body to my very soul, and with every mouthful, every shovelful, I grew as excited as Zaq, and in my mind I repeated his phrase: Our job is to find out the truth, even if it is buried deep in the earth." Rufus faces in verifying facts in a conflict zone where propaganda, fear, and survival distort reality. Rufus sees himself as a witness to violence, but this raises questions: *Is witnessing enough? What is the responsibility of the witness?* The ethical dilemma of using people's pain and suffering for a story and a career move. Rufus often reflects on how journalists (including himself) may be exploiting victims.

Oil on Water and *The Joys of Motherhood* both demonstrate the enduring impact of colonial legacies on political, economic, gender, and social realities in postcolonial Africa. Habila critiques neocolonial exploitation and the distortion of African identity through Western lenses. Emecheta examines the way colonial structures have reshaped African women's roles and challenged traditional values. They lead to conflicting definitions of African personality shaped by resistance versus imposed norms.

2.1. Violence and Inequality in Social Relationships

The normalization of violence during colonization has ensured the continuation of domination in colonized societies. The installed leaders with Western systems upheld European structures-education, governance, and economy-while they suppressed real change. Western powers continued to prioritize their own interests through influence and control. In *Oil on Water*, Ibiram represents the microcosmic image of post-colonial inequality. As a leader, he has inherited the aesthetics and privileges of colonial authority. His disconnection from the grassroots of realities of his own peoples reflects Helen Habila's critique of elite complicity in neocolonial exploitation. Habila's critique of neocolonial exploitation particularly reflects his narrative characteristics in *Oil on Water*. Through the lens of petro-capitalism and environmental degradation, Habila blends ecocentrism in postcolonial context by exposing the manner multinational oil corporation's perpetuate a new form of imperialism under the guise of globalization. On page 15, Habila represents a microcosmic image of post-colonial social degradation. He underlines that traditional structures have been co-opted into supporting foreign-dominated extractive capitalism. We read on page 15 of "Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context: the Status of Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood*": "Clearly the Chief wasn't a man of many words, but he appeared happy to be hosting us. I looked from the old man to his brother, trying to see a resemblance: there wasn't any. Our guide was grey, wiry and gnomish, whereas his brother was an impressive figure of a man, over six feet tall, and even seated he dominated the whole room, making everything else appear on a smaller scale. The introductions over, the old man sat down beside his brother. A radio, tuned to a station speaking a language I could not identify, played softly on a side table next to Chief Ibiram."

Oil on Water elucidates the small, marginalized guide with his brother Chief Ibiram. Ibiram's physical dominance characterizes the lingering power of traditional authority amid Niger Delta's turmoil. Ibiram's silent stoicism exposes the complex leadership constrained by corporate and military forces when the unfamiliar radio language explains fragmentation and alienation.

Mbembe's theory of necropolitics explained in *Necropolitics* [7] refers to the power to decide who lives and dies provides a critical lens to understand the violence and inequality in Habila's *Oil on Water* and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. In *Oil on Water*, this power manifests through environmental destruction and militarized violence that render Niger Delta communities disposable. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's experiences on social death as her value is reduced to reproductive utility within a patriarchal colonial order.

The harsh declaration on page 59 of *Oil on Water*: "There's a war going on! People are being shot. In Port Harcourt oil

companies are being bombed, police stations are being overrun... I can shoot you right now and throw you into the swamp and that's it" [8]-captures the brutal atmosphere of lawlessness and disposability in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. This outburst encapsulates the convergence of political violence, economic exploitation, and social inequality that defines life in the oil-rich but devastated Niger Delta. Rufus' in *Oil on Water* threat illustrates the dehumanization of civilians in a region caught between corrupt state forces, militant resistance groups, and profit-driven multinational corporations. Violence is not just a consequence of conflict-it becomes a normalized tool of governance and control. The stark inequality between the oil companies' wealth and the impoverished, polluted communities reflects a necropolitical dynamic, where, as Achille Mbembe argues, state and corporate powers determine who is allowed to live and who is condemned to die. Through such scenes, *Oil on Water* exposes the fragile boundaries between life and death, authority and lawlessness, in a postcolonial state fractured by resource extraction and systemic abandonment.

In *Oil on Water*, Habila exposes the entanglement of traditional authority with neo-colonial structures of power. In these structures of power exist inequality and violence, two perpetrated images of power and control. Habila constructs inequality economically, ecologically and socially. Ibiram's alignment with oil interests obliges him to maintain power at the cost of environmental degradation and social fragmentation. The repetition of words 'gun-s' (seventy-one times), *gunfire-s* (two times), *shooting* (six times), *blood(y)* (eighteen times), *wound-s* (six times), *burn-t/ed* (twelve times), *throat* (four times), *bullet* (four times), *beaten*, *torture* (two times), *explosions*, *corpses*, *machetes*, *scars*, etc. expose the physical violence. In addition to the physical violence, environmental violence is an important facet of *Oil on Water*. The repeated versions of expressions like *Pollution*, *contaminated*, *slicks*, *dead fish*, *scorched earth*, *blackened river*, *oil spill*, *destroyed mangroves* expose environmental violence. Without forgetting military and political violence create a new other interesting space with expression like *soldiers*, *rebels*, *hostage*, *militia*, *abduction*, *kidnapping*, *executions*, *interrogation*, and *insurgency*. The first list details physical harm from military and corporate conflicts. The second links environmental destruction to human suffering in a form of slow, lasting violence. The third explains ongoing clashes between government, oil companies, and local groups, with psychological trauma-fear, grief, paranoia. It reveals the deep emotional scars endured by the characters.

The quiet desperation captured in the scene-where "the mother and children had been huddled beneath a large blanket... and their expression told me they felt more pity for me than fear" on the page 171 by Habila illuminates the intimate and haunting effects of armed conflict on ordinary lives in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. This moment strips away the abstractness of war, revealing instead its human core: the families who hide, tremble, and wait in silence for vio-

lence to pass. These civilians, trapped within domestic spaces transformed into makeshift shelters, embody the deep psychological trauma and uncertainty endured by those caught in the crossfire of postcolonial resource conflicts. The children's reaction—more pity than fear—exposes a reversal of expected power dynamics: the journalist, traditionally an observer of suffering, becomes a figure of shared, even pitied, fragility. The presence of the frightened father, “a tall, distracted-looking fisherman,” further foregrounds how war displaces traditional roles and destabilizes familial authority. In *Oil on Water*, Habila confronts the reader with the emotional and spatial displacement wrought by political violence, offering not only a critique of systemic inequality and militarization but also a poignant reminder of the resilience and quiet dignity of those who endure it. On the same page, we read: “The mother and children had been huddled beneath a large blanket, and now the children peered at me from outside the light’s circumference, and their expression told me they felt more pity for me than fear. They had been here a whole day now. They had locked themselves up in the toilet when the shooting began, and afterwards they had moved to this tiny room, coming out only to go to the toilet or to look for food. The husband was a tall, distracted-looking fisherman and he jumped at the slightest noise, clearly scared witless for his children’s safety. I wondered if there were similar families in the other houses, huddled beneath blankets, stifling their children’s cries, waiting for the storm to blow away. Revived by the water and dry meat, I stood up.” In *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila masterfully depicts the collapse of everyday life under the weight of militarized conflict. The scene in which a mother and her children huddle beneath a blanket, having taken refuge in a toilet before moving to a tiny room, illustrates the way domestic spaces—traditionally associated with comfort and safety—are transformed into zones of anxiety and survival. The author centers on a powerful reversal where the narrator, meant to be an observer, becomes as vulnerable as the community he documents, highlighted by the children’s pity. It breaks down the barrier between witness and victim, showing shared fragility, while also challenging traditional male roles through the fearful father’s protective instinct.

2.2. Identity and Gender Issues

Identity and gender are pivotal in analyzing power relations, cultural norms, and self-conception within colonial and postcolonial frameworks. Gender, as a social construct, intersects with race, class, and tradition to influence individuals’ experiences, particularly those of women, under patriarchal and colonial regimes. Postcolonial literature, exemplified by *The Joys of Motherhood*, critically examines how colonialism and modernization disrupt traditional gender roles and cultural identities, often leading to identity conflicts and marginalization. This intersectional analysis elucidates how women negotiate oppressive structures and strive to reclaim agency and voice amidst socio-political transformations.

On page 15 of *Oil on Water*, the expressions ‘...grey, wiry and gnomish...’ indicate the age and maturity of the Chief ‘grey’, energy and nervous tension, especially in physical demeanor ‘...wiry...’, and small, aged, perhaps with exaggerated and unusual features ‘...gnomish...’. Calling the Chief “grey, wiry and gnomish” paints the picture of a small, older person who is lively, sharp, and perhaps strange and quirky in appearance, resembling a figure from folklore. It suggests vitality despite age, and possibly wisdom cloaked in an odd exterior. Characters such as the journalists Rufus and Zaq, grapple with fractured identities in a society torn between modernity and tradition, global capitalism and local resistance.

On page 81 of *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta captures Nnu Ego’s psychological and cultural struggle as she transitions from rural, traditional Ibuza to modern, colonial Lagos. In the rural space, Ibuza, a traditional Igbo society, women had defined roles in the household economy—they contributed to family welfare, raised children, and participated in community life. In contrast, in colonial Lagos, under the influence of European systems, men were expected to be sole breadwinners, marginalizing women and rendering their traditional contributions invisible and unnecessary. Nnu’s desire to act like a traditional Ibuza woman (e.g., raising her baby with care and independence) is seen as “risky” in the new urban setting. The death of her child becomes symbolic of the clash between old and new worlds. “...play it according to the new rules...” in *The Joy of Motherhood*’s 81 page illustrates Nnu Ego’s reluctant acceptance of modern, colonial gender norms that strip her of traditional power and define her worth only in terms of subservience and motherhood. On the same page, we can read: “The voices of the gods had said so too, as her father had confirmed to her in his messages. She might not have any money to supplement her husband’s income, but were they not in a white man’s world where it was the duty of the father to provide for his family? In Ibuza, women made a contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role. Nnu Ego told herself that the life she had indulged in with the baby Ngozi had been very risky: she had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child. This time she was going to play it according to the new rules”. Here, Emecheta explains the colonial disruption of gender roles and the emotional toll it takes on African women like Nnu Ego. This also explains the manner colonial modernity redefines womanhood, not through empowerment, but through economic dependency and social erasure.

The imposition of patriarchal authority in both traditional and colonial settings is a recurring theme in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where women’s autonomy is often undermined by legal, cultural, and marital structures. A striking example appears on page 50 of *The Joy of Motherhood* when Nnu Ego’s husband asserts, “But not now that the gods have legalized our marriage, Nnu Ego the daughter of Agbadi. As I

said earlier, you have to do what I say. Your father cannot help you now". Marriage is shaped by both tradition and colonial law, grants men total control over women, erasing their identity and agency.

Ego's marriage characterizes a shift of authority from her father to her husband, blending traditional and colonial laws that legitimize male dominance and demand female obedience. She loses autonomy and is reduced to a wife valued only for obedience and fertility. This illustrates the systemic subjugation of women. Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, reveals that pre-colonial African societies often had flexible gender roles where women held significant power. In contrast, *The Joys of Motherhood* demonstrates the manner colonialism and capitalism imposed stricter, patriarchal norms on women's lives. Nnu Ego's fights highlight how historical and external forces—not just tradition-shaped women's oppression. Emecheta critiques the way motherhood is valued differently for men and women in *The Joys of Motherhood*. This is shown in a scene where Nnu Ego shares her happiness about being pregnant, saying, "You are not even happy to see me pregnant - the greatest joy of my life!" but her husband's response shows his emotional distance and lack of shared joy. This moment highlights the emotional gap between them and questions the traditional roles and feelings tied to motherhood. Through their conversations on pages 50 and 51, we read: "Of course I am happy to know that I am a man, yes, that I can make a woman pregnant. But any man can do that". This exchange underscores the contrasting meanings of pregnancy for men and women within a patriarchal society. While motherhood represents the ultimate form of identity, fulfillment, and social validation for women like Nnu Ego, it holds little lasting emotional and existential weight for men, who view reproduction as a mere proof of masculinity. Emecheta uses this dialogue to expose how motherhood, though idealized as a source of joy and purpose, is also a site of deep inequality—where women's value is reduced to reproductive function, and men's involvement ends at biological contribution. On the same page, we read: "You are not even happy to see me pregnant - the greatest joy of my life!" "Of course I am happy to know that I am a man, yes, that I can make a woman pregnant. But any man can do that". On the same page, the revelation's exchange between Nnu Ego and her husband encapsulates one of the core critiques of *The Joys of Motherhood*—the gendered imbalance in emotional investment,

meaning, and responsibility in parenthood and reproduction. Nnu Ego's exclamation - "the greatest joy of my life!" - reflects how deeply she has internalized the societal expectation that motherhood defines womanhood. In her cultural context, a woman's primary value is rooted in her ability to conceive and bear children.

On page 137 of *The Joy of Motherhood*: "They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children". For Nnu Ego, pregnancy is not just a biological experience—it is a social achievement that gives her purpose, status, and self-worth. The emotion in her statement reveals how desperately she has clung to this role as her only path to dignity and belonging in a world that offers women little else. In contrast, her husband's response - "any man can do that" - trivializes her pregnancy, revealing how men view fatherhood differently. To him, impregnating a woman is merely a validation of masculinity, a biological act that proves he is a "man," but not something to be emotionally involved in and responsible for beyond conception. This statement underscores a detachment from the burden of parenting, which is socially and emotionally offloaded onto women. His words reflect the broader patriarchal structure, in which men claim the symbolic power of reproduction while women bear the material and emotional labor of child-rearing. Emecheta uses this moment to critique both traditional gender roles and modern male disengagement within urban, colonial Nigeria. It reveals how women are still bound to traditional expectations of motherhood even in a changing world, while men are free to define their masculinity in ways that exclude emotional and caregiving labor.

Table 1. presents a comparative overview of the transformation of gender roles across three major historical phases—pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial—as portrayed in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. This progression highlights the shifting roles of women and men within the family and society, while also reflecting the broader socio-political and economic changes that shaped gender dynamics in African culture. Emecheta's narrative reveals how colonial influence and urbanization disrupted traditional structures, leading to a redefinition of femininity and masculinity, often to the detriment of both. The table categorizes these changes across occupational, familial, and societal lines to underscore the gendered implications of colonial and postcolonial transitions.

Table 1. Frequency of Societal Roles and Thematic Occurrences.

Occupations Periods	Pre-colonial Period	Colonial Period	Postcolonial Period
WOMEN'S ROLES	1) Matriarchs	1) Child bearers	1) Overburdened mothers
	2) Respected mothers	2) Economically dependent	2) Marginalized in cities
	3) Vital in family unit	3) Limited public role	3) Conflicted identities

Occupations Periods	Pre-colonial Period	Colonial Period	Postcolonial Period
MEN'S ROLES	1) Heads of family 2) Farmers, warriors	1) Wage earners (colonial) 2) Urban migrants	1) Disempowered by poverty 2) Loss of patriarchal control
SOCIETAL STRUCTURE	1) Communal society 2) Traditions respected	1) Colonial hierarchy 2) Family roles disrupted	1) Neo-colonial pressures 2) Gender role confusion

Ego represents the way colonial modernity undermines traditional values. These values leave women burdened without empowerment and lost status for fight. With her numerous children, Nnu faces poverty and loneliness which demonstrates that motherhood cannot ensure dignity and happiness in solitude.

2.3. Environmental Degradations

This part evaluates the way *Oil on Water* portrays environmental destruction caused by exploitation and poor governance. It highlights the manner the novel uses imagery to connect ecological harm with human suffering, displacement, and resistance. On page 9 of *Oil on Water*, 'grass' represents natural life and purity. This representation is a symbol of resilience and survival in a hostile environment. Environmental suffocation by oil highlights the destruction of life caused by environmental pollution. On this same page, we read: "*The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands*". This quotation explains that film of oil suffocating the grass symbolizes the omnipresence of pollution in the Niger Delta due to oil exploitation. On page 129, it is more explicit. We read on the page 129: "*The shrine was started a long time ago after a terrible war - no one remembers what caused the war - when the blood of the dead ran in the rivers, and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died, and the dead bodies of warriors floated for miles on the water, until they were snagged on mangrove branches on the banks, or got stuck in the muddy swamps, half in and half out of the water. It was a terrible time. The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red*". "*The shrine was started a long time ago after a terrible war...*" explains a historical trauma that left a deep mark on the land and the people. The shrine is a symbol of memory and mourning - possibly created to honor the dead and to ward off further disaster. The following "*...no one remembers what caused the war...*" underscores the absurdity and futility of violent conflicts. Despite the destruction it brought, the cause has faded, emphasizing how wars can have long-lasting environmental and societal consequences even when the reasons are forgotten. "*The blood of the dead ran in the rivers...*" symbolizes the graphic metaphor for massive violence. Rivers, normally symbols of life, are turned into carriers of death. The image of blood in rivers suggests the pollution of

natural resources through human conflict. "*...so saturated with blood that the fishes died...*" is of ecological collapse. The unnatural state of the water has killed aquatic life, indicating how war contaminates not only people but entire ecosystems. "*...bodies of warriors floated... snagged on mangrove branches...*" is a grotesque image showing the way nature becomes a graveyard. The mangrove, a vital part of the ecosystem, is reduced to a resting place for corpses - this illustrates the desecration of the environment. War disrupts the natural cycle of people's lives. It poisons the environment and links human violence to lasting ecological damage.

In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, [9] Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that ecological destruction in postcolonial contexts is deeply entangled with the legacies of imperialism and global capitalism. They explore how literature can expose the ecological consequences of colonial exploitation, the displacement of indigenous people, and the ongoing marginalization of local voices in environmental discourses. The degrading Niger Delta environment and political issues embodies Huggan and Tiffin's analysis of the postcolonial environment representing physical exploitation and symbolic silence. Habila exposes the way colonial structures and legacies with global capitalism perpetuate environmental and social injustice.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, [10] Nixon notes that slow violence erodes cultures and communities over time, making the poor increasingly invisible and disposable. Nixon argues that slow violence is hard to narrate in the media because it lacks drama and newsworthiness, which is exactly what Habila explores (journalists are the main characters in *Oil on Water*-but even they struggle to capture or report the slow, creeping nature of the disaster.) Colonization has created weakened governments politically. These governments remained unable to control their lands, and they were burdened with fragile institutions. This legacy that causes division, neocolonial dependence, and elite betrayal fuels conflict and inequality.

2.4. Patriarchy in Social Norms

The present part analyses *The Joys of Motherhood*. This remains a critique of patriarchal norms in traditional Igbo and colonial times. Through Nnu's image, Emecheta explores motherhood and marriage usage to control women's identities and reinforce male dominance. This system where male

dominate through institutions and ideologies of social and political lives has created a space of social fabric that normalizes abnormality. These 'rules' certainly guide people's behavior, expectations and manipulate social relationships. In postcolonial society where tradition and modernity find existence, patriarchy shapes normative structures in families, religions, education, and institutions. The intersection of modernity and tradition through local people's patriarchy and colonial legacies has initiated layered systems of segregation valorizing masculinity, control of women's bodies and sexualities. It sustains gender biases across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial political and social norms that reflect women's silence, resistance and cultural negotiation.

Feminist theorists such as Sylvia Walby, Bell Hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have explored how patriarchy operates through institutional, discursive, and interpersonal means. Walby's conceptualization of patriarchy as a system with interrelated structures-such as paid work, the state, culture, and violence-highlights the systemic nature of gender domination. Meanwhile, Mohanty critiques the universalization of Western feminist frameworks and emphasizes the importance of analyzing patriarchy within specific cultural and historical contexts. Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* [11] is a foundational text that critiques the intersections of race, gender, and class in the marginalization of Black women, especially within both feminist and civil rights movements. Hooks argues that Black women have historically been subjected to a unique form of oppression that combines racism, sexism, and economic exploitation, shaping their identities and lived experiences in ways that mainstream feminism often overlooks.

Ego's personality is characterized by the way women are valued for motherhood. In regard to Bell Hooks, Nnu represents the exploitation of women's reproductive labor under capitalist patriarchy. On page 80, Nnu had often reminded herself of an old saying among her people: *money and children don't go together*. Ibuza's traditional beliefs are connected to wealth accumulation with childlessness. They expect mothers to choose nurturing over prosperity. This tension (economic survival and maternal duty) highlights how social norms constrained women's roles and shaped their life choices. On this page, we read: "*She had reminded herself of the old saying that money and children don't go together: if you spent all your time making money and getting rich, the gods wouldn't give you any children; if you wanted children, you had to forget money, and be content to be poor. She did not remember how this saying had originated among her people; perhaps it was because a nursing mother in Ibuza could not go to the market to sell for long, before she had to rush home to feed her baby*". The quote that "*money and children don't go together*" reflects a traditional view that places a higher value on motherhood and family over material wealth. It suggests a cultural belief that the pursuit of wealth might come at the cost of fertility and the blessings of children. This perspective is deeply rooted in the lived realities of

women, especially in societies like Ibuza, where childcare responsibilities limit a mother's economic activities. The saying has originated as a practical observation: a nursing mother could not spend extended time away from her infant to engage in market trading and other income-generating work without compromising the child's well-being. In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, this tension between motherhood and economic survival reveals the limited access to resources to women and men's ability to have more access. The protagonist, Nnu Ego, embodies the challenges faced by many women in balancing societal expectations of motherhood with the harsh realities of urban poverty and capitalism. Nnu Ego's story demonstrates the emotional and physical toll of this conflict, as she struggles to provide for her family while fulfilling her cultural role as a mother. In reference to this, on page 182 of *The Joys of Motherhood*, we read: "*After I have rested, I must go and see that nice woman Adankwo in Ibuza. She must be longing for a man. For a woman to be without a man for five years! My brother will never forgive me*".

Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* [12] is a groundbreaking historical and theoretical analysis of how race, gender, and class intersect in the oppression of women, particularly Black women. Davis critiques the limitations of mainstream (white, bourgeois) feminism by uncovering how systems of racial capitalism, slavery, and patriarchy have uniquely shaped the experiences of women of color, especially in relation to labor and reproduction. Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* similarly interrogates the idealization of motherhood under the pressures of colonialism, patriarchy, and economic dependence. Nnu Ego's story mirrors many of the structural critiques Davis raises-especially the ways in which women's bodies and labor are controlled, exploited, and devalued. In *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis traces the way women were expected to bear children to expand the enslaved labor force, yet they received no recognition of their maternal dignity and emotional needs. This theme echoes powerfully in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego's worth is defined entirely by her ability to bear children. Her reproductive labor is seen not as a source of personal joy but as a duty to lineage and patriarchy. Nnu Ego's mothering becomes a tool for the survival of others - her husband, her children, and her wider family - while her own life is drained of joy, agency, and reward.

Davis' insights help us understand this as a system that exploits women's reproductive labor while denying them power over their own lives. Davis analyses the manner the capitalist structures divide labor along gender and racial lines, with Black women often relegated to the most marginalized and unprotected forms of work-both in the domestic sphere and in the labor market. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego is not formally employed, yet she labors constantly: *washing, selling, cooking, cleaning, parenting*. Nnu Ego's work [street vendor] symbolizes Angela Davis's idea of the "*forced entry*" of women into exploitative, unpaid labor essential for survival.

Her and Nnaife's dependence on colonial structures exposes how oppression and capitalism reinforce patriarchal norms and marginalize both genders. Nnu's lonely death in poverty, abandoned by the children she lived for, tragically illustrates the devaluation of women's labor and worth.

2.5. Tensions in Socio-political Relationships

People's relationships shape the intersection between power, identity, history and political forces. The connection arises from struggles over authority, representation, and resource's distribution across communities. On page 55 of *Oil on Water*, The Major demonstrates the deep emotional and political scars left by the Niger Delta conflict. Major's court-martial and exile to volatile areas symbolizes military failure to address violence and instability. Violence and instability characterize the fractured power and the unresolved tension. Major represents the symbol and character of political neglect, and human cost of resource exploitation. Colonialism, patriarchy, and economic hardship create conflicting pressures in African women's lives. Nnu Ego's experiences with Nnaife, Oshia, and Adaku reflect emotional disconnection, generational conflict, and female rivalry shaped by oppressive social systems and cultural collisions. At the very beginning of *Oil on Water*, a passage explains a section of tragedy and chaos. This section represents socio-political tensions. By describing the fire—"an explosion in the bar with the oil drums" that quickly consumes "half the town"—characterizes the ongoing consequences of environmental destruction. The non-controllable fire characterizes the rampant corruption and exploitation in the Niger Delta. The narrator's family losses reflect the deep personal and collective trauma caused by systemic injustice.

Oil on Water is not just a story of personal tragedy but a critique of the structural tensions that continue to destabilize communities and lives across postcolonial Africa. On page 3 of *Oil on Water*, we read: "So, yes, there was an accident, a fire. An explosion in the bar with the oil drums. The fire flew on the wind from house to house, and in a few minutes half the town was ablaze. Many people died, including John's father. They say he died trying to save my sister, Boma, and if it wasn't for him, she'd have died. My father was imprisoned. He hasn't smoked any more since that day." The journey through the Delta is a metaphor in search for truth and identity in a postcolonial lens. Habila critiques state power and rebel violence.

In *Oil on Water* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, the pope is repeatedly displaced by oil drilling, military operations, social facts and conditioning. Villagers like those in Irikefe are voiceless and marginalized, echoing the silencing of the subaltern. "...silencing of the subaltern" [13] comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's works. Spivak critiques Western intellectuals who claim to "give voice" to the oppressed. The colonized were represented by colonizers (governors, missionaries, anthropologists), not allowed to define them-

selves.

Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* offers a compelling theoretical framework for understanding the sociopolitical tensions experienced by African women navigating colonial and postcolonial systems. In her anthropological study of pre-colonial Igbo society, Amadiume reveals a fluid and pragmatic gender system in which roles and responsibilities were not rigidly tied to biological sex. Colonial rules interrupted local gender roles that empowered women. Adaku challenges patriarchy and colonial capitalism. She reclaims precolonial female agency through trade. Oshia embraces Western individualism. This explains the intergenerational divide in postcolonial society. In consequence of colonial disruption of traditional gender structures, *The Joys of Motherhood*'s characters demonstrate personal and social costs of disruption. This embodies the tensions of a transitional society. In the Yoruba patriarchal system, women's social worth is largely tied to their fertility. Page 101 of *The Joys of Motherhood* reads: "Iyawo," a Yoruba word meaning 'new wife', was the name given to a woman without any children". "Iyawo" symbolizes how gender, culture, and sociopolitical forces intersect in postcolonial Africa, revealing the tension between women's agency and the patriarchal expectation of motherhood for social legitimacy.

In the discussion on page 166 of *The Joys of Motherhood*, we notice: "This Lagos, it makes me forget my position sometimes. It will not happen again, I promise". Oyeronke Oyewumi challenges Western assumptions about gender in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* [14]. Oyewumi underlines that gender remains a binary social classification. Social categorization is not universal. It is the consequence of colonial imposition. She maintains that society in Africa [Igbo society] is organized through age, generation, and seniority rather than female and male gender binaries. Through Oyewumi's framework, *The Joys of Motherhood* demonstrates the way colonialism imposed restrictive gender roles that reduce women like Nnu Ego to powerless reproductive labor, erasing their agency. Parsons' theory of social stability is challenged as Nnu Ego's traditional maternal role clashes with colonial urban realities, causing a breakdown in societal cohesion.

Habila explores tensions between government soldiers and militant groups. They use violence but represent opposing forces state control versus grassroots resistance. Colonel Doye and the rebel Commander in *Oil on Water* represent the brutal symmetry between state repression and insurgent desperation. This figure underscores the state's failure to protect its citizens. Rufus's encounters with villagers [the MadWoman and the Woman with the Burned Face] put in light the class and urban-rural divides that shape mistrust and resentment. Rufus' presence as a journalist reveals the way local voices are often sidelined in national and global narratives.

Isoken's character in *The Joys of Motherhood* trauma reveals how women's bodies are politicized and violated in

sociopolitical conflicts. The kidnapping of Isabelle's highlights the way foreign lives are prioritized over local suffering. In consequence, Rufus's strained relationship with his father symbolizes a deeper tension between tradition and modernity, echoing national conflicts over identity, morality, and resistance. Expressions like *oil, water, fire, and ruined villages*, along with terms such as *militants, pollution, pipeline, and silence*, all serve as powerful narrative devices through which Habila explores the deep-rooted sociopolitical tensions of postcolonial Nigeria.

Oil remains the major economic resource in Nigeria. It is also a source of suffering for people. It symbolizes neo-colonial dependence in African postcolonial states. 'Water' reflects the uncertain journey of Rufus and Zaq-symbolizing the chaotic social and political landscape of Nigeria. "Now, see, everything is in ruins. Nothing left, it is a miracle so many are still alive" in *Oil on Water*'s 154 page represents abandonment by the state, the collapse of communal life, and the direct impact of sociopolitical neglect. This can be seen on page 55 also: "The Doctor also looked away towards the water, lost in some detail of the ruined, decomposing landscape".

On page 187, it is mentioned that "You are right, it will not happen again. To make sure it doesn't I will take one of you with me. Just as insurance. When we are sure you haven't gone to the government soldiers to betray us, he will be released. You decide who." In this context, a militant speaks threateningly to assert control and ensure compliance. By insisting on taking a hostage "as insurance," he uses fear and coercion to prevent the others from alerting government soldiers. The final line, "You decide who," intensifies the psychological pressure by forcing the group to make an impossible moral choice, illustrating the brutal power dynamics and tension in the conflict zone. It reflects socio-political tension by dramatizing the power struggle between armed militants and civilians caught in the crossfire of a larger conflict. The militant's threat to take a hostage "as insurance" symbolizes the manner innocent individuals are used as pawns in the violent contest between rebel groups and the state, mirroring the breakdown of trust, governance, and civil protection. The use of words like 'government' (more than fifteen times), 'soldier' (more than seventy times) illustrates the tensions that exist between groups. On page 31, Habila illustrates the chaotic sociopolitical fragmentation in the Niger Delta, where multiple militant groups-like the Black Belts of Justice, Free Delta Army, and AK-47 Freedom Fighters-compete for power and profit through ransom and violence. The transformation of human beings into objects of exchange within capitalist systems, as negotiations for ransom become routine, reveals how the oil-fueled crisis turns abduction into a political and economic strategy, deeply entangled with corruption, survival, and marginalization. We read on this same page, "So far we've had over a dozen ransom demands by different groups: the Black Belts of Justice, the Free Delta Army, and the - - The AK-47 Freedom Fighters. -

It's all so confusing. This is a chance to make contact with the real kidnappers. We'll negotiate, as long as she's alive, we'll pay...". Repression, tyranny, and brutality have created a dangerous environment where human lives are traded. In contrast, *The Joys of Motherhood* highlights the way colonial modernity disrupts traditional gender roles and family structures. Both texts show how colonial legacies continue destabilizing African societies through environmental and social upheaval.

3. Conclusion

Oil on Water and *The Joys of Motherhood* serve a powerful lens through the complex and often painful relationship between society and the individual in Nigeria is critically examined. They expose the multifaceted struggles faced by women within patriarchal and colonial legacies, revealing how gender roles, motherhood, sociopolitical and identity are shaped and often constrained by systemic injustice. Habila and Emecheta urge intellectuals to see literature as a revolutionary tool that challenges enduring colonial structures of power by the exposition of postcolonial failures in leadership, institutions, and culture. *Oil on Water* represents ongoing imperialism disguised as globalization.

The lingering crisis in postcolonial Nigeria stem not merely from poor leadership. They originate from deep-rooted colonial legacies-political, ecological, and psychological that continue to shape the present. Colonialism dismantled local governance. It replaced it with economically extractive and administratively fractured systems built for hegemonic control, resulting in fragile institutional legacies and deeply fragmented societies.

Author Contributions

Lassana Kants the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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