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

**ABSTRACT.** Trauma studies are no doubt a burgeoning area of discourse that has captured the literary imagination of academic scholars for a few decades running. This study examines the complex relationship between socio-cultural influences and intimate personal relations portrayed in trauma fiction, such as Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Specifically, how do these depictions in Habila's fiction direct our awareness of the catastrophic effects of war, poverty, hostage-taking, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche? How do traumatised people respond? To what extent can we theorise trauma studies and ecocritical studies? How traumatised is the physical landscape portrayed in Habila's fiction? The study concludes by insisting that governments of nations and relevant international organisations owe the people the responsibility of intentionally committing to rearticulating and rehabilitating the social conditions, voices, and, indeed, the lives of marginalised people.

**KEYWORDS:** trauma, war, psyche, environment, "new slaves"

### **Introduction**

The term "trauma" has been used in many ways and has found a place in several disciplines and lexicons. Traumatic events can include physical and sexual abuse, neglect, bullying, community-based violence, disaster, terrorism, and war. Thus, we can have national Trauma, historical Trauma, psychological/emotional Trauma and ecological Trauma. The original meaning of "trauma" is wound, but when used as such, it only conveys the idea of an injury inflicted on the body. However, in the health and behavioural sciences, Trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. Unlike the body's wound, which is simple and healable, the wound of the mind is often difficult to heal. According to Cathy

Caruth, "the wound on the mind is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and it's therefore not easily available to consciousness until it imposes itself repeatedly through nightmares." (1995, 6).

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

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

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

The field of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and sociology have taken a renewed interest in the problem of trauma. In 1980, American Psychiatric Association finally acknowledged the long-recognized but frequently ignored phenome-

non under the title, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)”, which included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes (1995, 3).

The above details show the connection between PTSD and Trauma, revealing the imposition on the mind of frustrating events that are inexorably linked with Trauma. Various studies reveal that Trauma is formerly a medical term used to refer to a wound or, external bodily injury or mental injury, primarily one triggered by emotional distress, the Memory of which is subdued and remains unheard, or the state of the situation so caused. In postcolonial discourse, the common themes of trauma studies include displacement, dispossession, segregation, political violence, genocide, reparation, rehabilitation, healing, and recovery. Following this, a traumatized individual or group can afterwards experience psychological healing or material recovery. By material recovery, we refer to issues such as reparation or remediation, restitution, rehabilitation, and the transformation of a wounded political, social, and economic system.

Initially situated in the domain of medicine and then psychology, the study of Trauma has, since 1990, become relevant in literary and cultural studies. Indeed, as Trauma has become a prominent theme in life writing and fiction, its studies have emerged as a new field within the humanities. Prominent among the publications in the field since the 1990s are such works as Cathy Caruth’s essay collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and her monograph, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). Several studies on Trauma in fiction, non-fiction, film, and culture subsequently followed these works. As one writer emphasized, “the growing attention devoted to trauma in academic discourses is closely intertwined with its rising recognition in general and media discourses” (Vickroy, 2). Trauma and Memory have emerged as key cultural categories and concerns. Thus, scholars like Luckhurst have identified Trauma in the light of an “exemplary conceptual knot” in contemporary networks of knowledge (14). In contrast, Anne Whitehead, on her part, identifies Trauma as a “memory boom,” diagnosing widespread “cultural obsessions” with both individual and collective Memory (*Memory*, 1–2). The concept of Trauma has expanded beyond its original disciplinary ground and crossed boundaries between various fields and discourses; thus, it has become increasingly, even notoriously, complex and slippery.

Theorists like Cathy Caruth, Donnick Lacapra, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman employed Freud's theory as the base upon which they developed their theory on Trauma. Sigmund Freud argued for what he termed "the conscious/unconscious functioning." (YEAR, 11). Trauma, therefore, emerged following Freud's conscious/unconscious functioning—which can simply be explained to mean the immediate experience of the wounding and the belated effects of that wound in the form of dreams, hallucinations, flashbacks, and repeated actions which aggravate or open up the wound. Following this, several areas of social concern, such as the recognition of the prevalence of violence against women and children (rape, battering, incest), the identification of the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder, as we find in war veterans who fought in wars, the awareness of the psychic scars occasioned by the Holocaust, becomes the points of departure in conceptualizing the concept of Trauma. The scholars earlier mentioned in this paragraph argued that Trauma is an overwhelming condition which affects the psychology of people who are confronted with an injury—either bodily or psychological.

Trauma theory states that "traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with an external threat" (Van der Kolk, YEAR, 23). The way we think, learn, feel, remember, and cope with the world are affected by traumatic experiences, which affects the human brain by lessening its capacity.

What has literature got to do with Trauma? In trying to offer an answer to this question, it is important to highlight what Vickroy observed, "literary and imaginative approaches [to trauma] provide a necessary supplement to historical and psychological studies" (Trauma & Survival, 221). Literature, through imagination and forms of symbolization, provides approaches that can effectively express many extremes of human experience that often may not be correctly expressed and comprehended verbally. The fictional worlds offer trauma narratives the much-needed space where the phenomenon of Trauma can widely be explored, despite the multiplicity of perspectives any writer chooses to write from. In other words, literary texts and the fictional world in which they are created offer opportunities for nuanced engagements with the subject or theme of Trauma. This theme can be personalized, contextualized, or historicized. In addition, the synergy between literature and Trauma can produce engaging texts that can engage readers' powers of emotional identification, sympathy, and critical reflection. Worthy of note, some of these texts can serve important socio-cultural and political functions.

Following this, trauma writings, especially through the lenses of fiction, is not only “to make terrifying, alien experiences more understandable and accessible” (Vickroy, 222), but also to provide a means “of witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people” (Vickroy, 222). This position was, however amplified by Ann Whiteman, who reasoned that trauma fiction often brings as a major theme “the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” (Whitehead, 2004, p. 82); thus, contemporary literary writers within and outside Africa can now explore the theme of Trauma, incorporating its structures into their writings. This linking of trauma theory and literary texts does not only shed light on works of contemporary fiction it also highlights the inherent connections between trauma theory and the literary, which have often been overlooked.

Although Trauma has been explained to mean “an incomprehensible event that defiles all representation” (Leys, 200, p. 253), many literary writers have found means of representing Trauma in fiction in a way that conveys these challenges and, at the same time, facilitates its understanding.

## Ecological Trauma

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

Although it occurs slowly, this ecological violence, ranging from climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, oil spills and the environmental aftermath of war, is the greatest undoing of the human race. It is not pe-

cular to any region but a global trauma. However, owing to poor governmental legislation, enforcement and perhaps remedial responses, the poor regions of the world, those helpless victims of environmental despoliation, are the worst hit. Oil spills or blowouts from oil pipelines destroy large farms and fishing settlements, and the devastating effect of the incidence on the members of that community or region is unarguably traumatic.

To further explain the concept of ecological trauma, Chris Onyema (2011) describes it as “political and environmental devastation, as well as the anguish that impacts directly on the masses as victims of political emasculation and ecological pillage.” (205). Onyema’s definition reminds us of one of the unique benefits of the synergy between literature and ecology, which is “to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (Love, 237). So, when there is a “disturbance” of this consciousness, trauma becomes the aftermath (Erikson, 183). Ecological trauma is often witnessed by the poor masses, the helpless and voiceless, who have been compelled to live in the midst of gross ecological pillage or in the face of open environmental devastation, even to the detriment of their health and economic well-being. In the Niger Delta region, to be precise, the game of double standards and the government’s insincerity to the people is rife. We often find it in situations where the people are kept in the dark as to the quantity of oil extracted from their soil when developmental projects that are promised some Niger Delta rural communities by either the government or oil prospecting corporations are only written on papers and never executed when oil spill and blowouts erode farmlands yet no quick intervention from the oil companies when jobs in the Niger Delta region are given to other people at the expense of qualified youths and indigenes of the region. These and many other traumatic situations are some of the woes of the Niger Delta people in Nigeria. For Cathy Caruth (1995), to be “traumatised” is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (5). She maintained further

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

Put in other words, this “literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” occurs most disturbingly within the very knowledge and experience of the traumatised. Bringing this to the situation of the Ni-

ger Delta, as the loss of their farmlands and fishing settlement to oil exploration persist, as their educated and skilled youths suffer the denial of employment opportunities, as poverty remain unabated, as infrastructures are neglected and decay owing to government's inertia, the more traumatised the people would become in the face of these social ills. In other words, ecological trauma is the consequence of years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region which has neither translated into poverty reduction nor increased infrastructure. Sadly, oil wealth has not resulted in the reduction of unemployment for the Niger Delta people, it has not fostered the reduction of social conflicts and the ecology of the region has not fared any better.

### Helon Habila and the Disposable People

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

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

Using the first journey motif which featured two journalists, Zaq and Rufus as the point of departure, Habila's narrative paints a vivid picture of the trouble and the trauma of *disposable people*; a concept that was first used by Kevin Bales in his book, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (2012). As they journeyed, Rufus observed "thousands



of oil floating on the water” (Habila, 227). His observation is symbolic of the widespread pollution of land, water and air occasioned by “suspended stench of dead matter”. (Habila, 8). Even as Rufus and his team leader, Zaq proceeded in the journey despite the stench, they were further greeted by “dead bird draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots” (Habila, 8). With this imagery of rot and putrefaction, one can rightly judge that an already sick journalist like Zaq would be further exposed to a polluted environment, which will certainly devastate his already troubled health condition.

In describing the gravity of hazards these polluting conditions pose on the health and safety of the people, Bassey estimated that “over 100 flares sites in the Niger Delta belch 400 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere annually” (8). Beyond the polluted physical landscape, there are poor, less-advantaged people whose living condition is comparable with the deplorable environmental condition. They are the disposable people to borrow Kevin Bales’ coinage; an expression used to describe new slaves, who are not like Oluada Equaino or Friedrich Douglas; but slaves who are cheap, needing little care and are disposable.

For Bales, although slavery is considered illegal throughout the world today, yet several millions of humans are caught in the web of one of history’s oldest and ugly social institutions, known as slavery. Following accounts available from Kevin Bales’ book, the disturbing story of slavery today has confirmed a growing statistic of new slaves, also referred to as disposable people across Africa, Europe, the Americas, Asia, and other parts. Bales engaged in a pathetic investigation into the conditions of “new slavery,” one intricately linked to the global economy. Three interrelated factors that have helped create the new slavery are:

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

Bales’ vivid case studies present actual enslaved people, slaveholders, and public officials in well-drawn historical, geographical, and cultural con-



texts. In Habila's *Oil on Water*, a ready example is Michael, the little son of man in the novel *Oil on Water*. In the dialogue where the older man makes an emotion-laden plea for Zaq and Rufus to take his son along to Port Harcourt to keep the little boy away from vices that are rife in the region, one can vividly see the desperation and the frustration that would have overwhelmed the man had his plea been declined. By closely examining Irikiefe Island and her adjoining creeks, one can glean not just the fears of this father but the disposable condition in which he had found himself. His fear of the unknown and the risk he feels having his little son, Michael, growing up in such a volatile location are manifest forms of slow violence. Through the dialogue which ensued at that scene as we have carefully extracted it, the above assertion can be substantiated with the dialogue as evidence:

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

**Old Man:** Yes, He no get future here. Na good boy, very sharp. He go help you and your with with any work, any work at all, and you too you go send am go school. (Habila, 36).

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

Another category of *disposable people* that peopled Habila's fictional world, *Oil on Water*, are the numerous abductees of the many militant groups whose stock-in-trade is to kidnap oil company workers, and other categories of citizens for ransom. Many of these abductees are either re-sold or killed by their abductors when the ransom is either not paid or delayed. Their helpless situation leaves them at the mercy of these ruthless kidnapers. Isabel Flood found herself in this condition for a longer period, until she was rescued.

For the militants, therefore, this socially condemnable practice of “stealing” people for ransom, puts them forward as “new slave owners”. Additionally, the clandestine nature of their “business” makes them enemies of the law and society. In his response to the question of identifying his group, Henshaw, one of the hoodlums arrested by Major speaks of his own militant group which is different from the one headed by Professor:

- Does your group have a name?
- No! We used to have a name, but no more. That is for children and idiots. We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the earth on which we stand.
- Are you with the Professor?
- No! I have never met the Professor. We are a different group. (Habila, 154)

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

## Conclusion

Slavery is not a horror safely consigned to the past; it continues to exist throughout the world, even in developed countries like France and the United States. Across the world, enslaved people work and sweat, build, and suffer. Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. However, a person may experience trauma as a response to any event they find physically or emotionally threatening or harmful. Poor and less-privileged people often feel overwhelmed, helpless, shocked, or have difficulty processing their experiences. This sometimes pushes them to make themselves available as objects for the rich and well-to-do in society. In some ugly situations, these helpless members of society are reduced to carrying out some less-human, indeed dehumanising activities, which leaves them vulnerable or at the mercy of their “slave owners” or benefactors. To curb this, governments of nations and international organisations such as the UN should deploy a certain percentage of their tax or revenue generation towards providing welfare opportunities or social securities for the less privileged members of society.

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