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African Tropics and Ecological Crisis: Tourist Gaze in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and *Travellers*

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Abstract

The paper examines how Helon Habila's novels, *Oil on Water* (2010) and *Travellers* (2019), critique the tourist gaze as a means of commercializing ecological degradation and human dislocation in the vulnerable African tropics. Drawing on an African and Western postcolonial ecocritical framework, it demonstrates how Habila's narratives foreground the convergence of tourism, extractive capitalism, slow ecological violence, and neocolonial power dynamics. Applying John Urry's concept of the tourist gaze, Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence, and Judith Butler's notion of grievability, this paper argues that Habila's work shifts tourism studies and ecocriticism towards ecological justice and decolonial ethics. The paper highlights African environmental activism and intellectual traditions, particularly legacies inherited from Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wangari Maathai, by situating Habila's novels within a much longer history concerning resistance against environmental degradation in Africa. This paper attends to both theoretical dimensions as well as textual particulars within Habila's novels while contributing toward a postcolonial ecocriticism that resists Western domination over environmental knowledge by insisting on African epistemologies as central to any broader understanding of environmental crisis.

Keywords: African tropics, tourist gaze, slow violence, environmental tourism, ecological justice, African postcolonial ecocriticism, Helon Habila

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Introduction

At a time when Earth is in the Anthropocene with human activity having changed many of its ecosystems, and the impacts of environmental destruction becoming clearer, narratives from the tropics are crucial for understanding both the current environmental crisis and its deep human costs. The tropics as both geographical regions and ideological spaces hold an important but highly contradictory place in current discussions about the environment and postcolonial issues. During the era of exploration and colonialism, the tropical regions were perceived as territories of natural resources (which included indigenous people) ripe for exploitation (Karmakar & Chetty, 2023, p. 128). Western images of tropical areas conceived them as exciting and full of life, untamed yet open to being used for gain, environmentally beautiful but basically unstable. This image did not come about 'naturally' or by chance; instead, it held an ideological motive for colonial control and resource taking.

Edward Said's, *Orientalism* (1978), is the most important work to analyze how Western discourse constructed the "Orient" as a conceptual space and how power works through representation and imagination. Said argued that the Orient was not simply a geographical area but a Western invention, an imaginary place created to justify domination. Historian David Arnold (1995), building on Said's postcolonial framework, extended it to the tropics and argued that in these regions the environment becomes crucial to analysis. He called this "tropicality." This concept describes how European discourse has rendered tropical areas as inherently degenerate, dangerous, chaotic, and thus requiring domination and control. Arnold shows that just like Orientalism was an ideological effect whereby discourse became an instrument for justifying colonial power, so too was tropicality. By describing tropical environments as disordered, mismanaged, and in need of European "development", European imperial powers justified extensive resource extraction, political control, environmental cultivation, and even the removal of indigenous peoples from those environments. It made environmental racism appear natural, inevitable, and good: a civilizing mission.

In contemporary times, one the most dominant ways that tropical areas are used, taken over, and financially exploited is through tourism. This is often done by the same companies and countries that colonized these areas in the past. The way tourists look at things, what sociologist John Urry calls "the gaze," is not a simple or clear way of seeing; it is based on social ideas shaped by media images, advertising companies, guide books, marketing blurbs, and shared ideas about how places should be and what are good experiences. The tourist gaze turns landscapes, cultures, people, and communities into things for consumption. Many cultural tools train tourists to see certain things as beautiful, or interesting, or real—and as experiences to be bought. In tropical areas, the tourist gaze desires the imaginary of pure nature, unspoiled native cultures, and exotic otherness. However, in these same tropical places that are

being sold as tourist attractions, there also exist areas destroyed by extractivist industries, pollution, climate impacts, and cultural displacement—and here tourism must embellish or hide the violence behind the scenery visible to the tourist gaze.

The Nigerian novelist and poet, Helon Habila's literary writing engages seriously with postcolonial themes of environmental devastation, displacement, and the politics of witnessing in his two novels: *Oil on Water* (2010) and *Travellers* (2019). *Oil on Water* follows the protagonist, a journalist, as he travels through Nigeria's Niger Delta region, an area that has been turned into an ecological wasteland by decades of oil extraction. The novel describes the Delta not as a romantic wilderness or mere geographical space but as a "poison-scape." This is an area made toxic and unliveable by industrial violence. Habila renders the tourist gaze as one through which destruction can be seen, but only passively so; consumable and ultimately ineffective at creating change. *Travellers* moves its geographic focus to European cities wherein African migrants—many displaced due to environmental collapse, political violence, and economic precarity, struggle against extreme uncertainty forced upon them by mobility itself.

Helon Habila's novels dig into issues like environmental destruction, forced displacement and the question of what it means to witness these tragedies unfold. While travelogues often present "fragile tropics" as perfect paradises, in reality, these regions are fighting ecological collapses caused by over-tourism and extractive capitalism. As Lundberg et al. (2021) argue, the tropics, so long imagined as lush and full of life, are now at the forefront of climate change's impacts; rising ocean temperatures, increasing sea levels, ocean acidification, deforestation, and wildfires are taking their toll on coral reefs, rainforests, and mangroves—ecosystems that have been around for thousands of years (pp. 2-3). In the case of the African tropics, Zeleza et al. (1995) examine how colonial exploitations have often disrupted the relationships between local communities and their environments in Zambia, replacing sustainable practices with exploitative models of resource extraction (pp. 404-406). The role of literature becomes crucial in telling real stories that challenge mainstream touristic narratives about the environment. Samal and Samantaray (2025) explore how tropical futurisms challenge the persistent colonial perceptions of the African tropics, reclaiming them as sites of resilience, agency, and innovation, while addressing global issues like climate change and technological exploitation (p. 99). Tourism is part of this complex story. On one side, it is heralded as a way to bolster economies by bringing in tourists; but on the hindside, it contributes to environmental vulnerability. The coastal mangroves, coral reefs, and rainforests that are viewed as exotic tourist destinations are turning in ecologically exploited territories. Scholars and researchers have warned that excessive tourism and its concomitant infrastructural development damage the natural habits, increase levels of pollution, and affect ecological balance and biodiversity, especially in tropical regions such as Southeast Asia, the Amazon rainforests and parts of Africa (Duffy, 2010; Gössling et al., 2006).

> Tourism is closely associated with climate change. The sector is both a contributor to greenhouse gas emissions—through transport, accommodation, and other activities—and at the same time vulnerable to its impacts. Destinations dependent on climate-sensitive resources, such as snow or coral reefs, may experience profound changes. The global mobility of tourists also plays a role in the spread of invasive species, diseases, and contributes to growing pressures on local ecosystems. (Gössling et al., 2006, p. 114)

This paper argues that Habila's novels are an important decolonial intervention in contemporary tourism studies and ecocriticism. They reveal how the tourist gaze, be it on polluted landscapes or displaced human bodies, follows a deeper colonial history of reducing African peoples and African environments into consumable spectacles for foreign viewing and judgment. Importantly, Habila's work challenges Western theoretical frameworks by demanding that African voices, African scholarship, and African intellectual traditions be integrated into the analysis. In this regard, this paper places Ken Saro-Wiwa's environmental activism in the Niger Delta and Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement as crucial philosophical-activist frameworks for understanding Habila's literary project. The analysis unfolds in several steps: first, it examines how the tourist gaze operates in the works of Habila and its relation to slow violence and precarity; second, it analyzes the representations in *Oil on Water* regarding environmental destruction and indigenous dispossession; third, it explores the articulation in *Travellers* between ecological crisis and forced migration; finally, it argues what a decolonial ecological ethics may entail and how literature contributes to its articulation.

The Tourist Gaze and Environmental Ruin

John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" gives necessary terminology for understanding how landscapes are seen and consumed visually, as well as what political, economic and power processes this consumption makes possible and continues. Urry sees tourism not as a natural or innocent way of seeing but rather a socially constructed, historically particular practice formed through guide books, media representations, advertisements, narratives and collective popular imagination about how places should look and what experiences are worth having. Tourism marked by claims to leisure, pleasure, escape and authenticity, transforms into experiences that can be photographically captured and subsequently shared. This transformation, rendered innocent and benign, is frequently marketed as bringing economic benefits for local and a form of cultural appreciation. However, it has very substantial political and economic power. The tourist gaze actively constitutes the places it looks at, determining what becomes visible, what is kept hidden in the margins, what is valued and commodified, and finally what becomes disposable and ignored.

Urry differentiates between two main modes of tourist observation that organize how people relate to and consume places. The "romantic gaze" typifies tourists who are seeking a solitary intimate communion with nature or culture—the pursuit of an authentic personal experience away from crowds is the aesthetic of this type of tourist. The "collective gaze" typifies tourists who seek shared experiences and social validation through group participation. In the collective gaze, tourists want photographs and stories to share with others; they seek tangible proof of their existence in faraway places and the assurance that they have done something important and interesting enough to talk about. Both gazes are mediated by previous representations formed by what tourists expect to find, constituted through what media corporations and governments have represented as worthy of attention. Neither gaze is transparent or neutral; both are historically produced, culturally specific, and ideologically invested in particular power relationships and economic structures. In tropical contexts specifically, the tourist gaze has long been entwined with representations derived from and perpetuating colonial ideologies. As Arnold (1995) demonstrates through careful historical analysis, the tropics were imagined in European discourse as simultaneously and contradictorily irresistibly beautiful and fundamentally degraded—lush but dangerous, abundant yet chaotic, rich but uncivilized, natural yet requiring European management and development. This imaginative construction did not reflect objective reality; rather, it served to justify extraction and domination. The tropics were represented as existing to be developed, resourced, exploited, toured and profited from by external powers. When tourism and extraction become intertwined, as they have throughout the Global South for centuries, the result is a proliferation of what scholars call "dark tourism"—the commodification and consumption of sites of tragedy, violence and destruction. In dark tourism, human suffering itself becomes an attraction; human tragedy becomes a commodified experience to be observed, photographed, documented and narrated to distant audiences in ways that do not threaten the systems producing that suffering.

The tourist gaze, as it has been understood in tourism studies, is based on certain assumptions about aesthetic distance and voluntary participation. This analytical framework completely falls apart when we begin to think about those who have been forcibly displaced or whose very lives are structured by environmental destruction and ecological precarity. Rob Nixon's (2011) idea of "slow violence" becomes crucial and necessary here for understanding environmental destruction in the tropics. Nixon describes what he calls structural environmental violence—gradual, diffuse, invisible violence that often takes place outside the attention of the media as a particularly devastating form of structural violence against the poorest and vulnerable communities. Such violence is not spectacular; it does not create photogenic explosions, visible bodies or scenes that can be captured on television cameras and news coverage. Yet this type of devastation happens every day: oil spills that last decades make waterways unusable, soil degradation makes land uninhabitable for generations, chronic air pollution kills silently with asthma and cancer, water contamination makes fishing impossible as well as agriculture. Slow violence works

through systems of colonialism, capitalism, environmental racism rather than individual acts or visible violence. The people who are suffering from slow violence are often also under the tourist gaze at the same time; their suffering is made visible but read as exotic spectacle instead of being recognized for what it is a crisis in need of intervention and justice.

Judith Butler's (2009) notion of "grievability"—whose lives are deemed deserving of public mourning, whose deaths are recognized as tragic in public discourse adds a final theoretical dimension that is essential to this analysis. Butler argues that certain populations become rendered as "ungrievable" through media representation and political discourse. Grievability is distributed unequally among different populations; some deaths are mourned, memorialized, and investigated while other deaths go by unremarked and unmourned. In the context of tropical environmental destruction, it often means that local communities whose livelihoods depend on fragile ecosystems become invisible when their lands get destroyed. Their displacement will not be registered as tragedy but rather viewed as inevitable progress or acceptable collateral damage. A fisherman losing his means to live due to an oil spill is not seen in the light of tragedy; this is seen rather as collateral damage toward a bigger national development and economic growth project. The deaths of indigenous elders do not make news cycles; they are erased. Butler's framework helps understand why environmental destruction in the tropics that impacts billions attracts very little international media attention compared with similar disasters in rich countries that receive huge global media coverage and political mobilization.

Habila's novels refute these theoretical frameworks by asserting that the tourist gaze and structures of grievability must be interrogated simultaneously as they are dimensions of the same systems of power. They reveal environmental destruction and human displacement as non-separable phenomena; expressions of the same underlying neocolonial logics and power structures. A landscape rendered unrecognizable through pollution and an individual removed from their ancestral homeland do not constitute different problems; rather, they are two dimensions within one process of dispossession. Habila's literary exploration is essential in making this connection visible and challenges readers to confront their own complicity, however indirect and structural, in the systems that produce both environmental destruction as well as human displacement.

Oil on Water: The Niger Delta as Spectacle and Wasteland

Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) introduces the Niger Delta as a place where Rufus, an inexperienced journalist, goes in search of an abducted European woman amidst terrain modified by years of oil extraction. This narrative framework is both intentional and meaningful: Habila places reader and character alike as tourist-observers behind a character whose chief relationship to the Delta consists of curiosity, documentation, and the search for an interesting story. As Rufus moves farther into this landscape, Habila methodically dismantles the tourist gaze which is implicated in this

environmental destruction, rendering violence invisible, manageable and finally acceptable.

The Niger Delta has been a site of extraction by multinational oil corporations for decades. This region has been a victim of what environmental justice scholars refer to as "environmental racism," or the intentional uneven distribution of environmental hazards among poor and minority communities. Ken Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni writer and environmental activist who was killed by the Nigerian military in 1995 for his activism against the oil companies, considered the Delta as a classic case study in environmental colonialism and environmental racism. Saro-Wiwa's writings and activism extensively chronicle how oil operations destroyed Ogoni lands through gas flaring (burning excess natural gas releases carcinogens into the air), massive oil spills that destroyed fisheries and agriculture, pipeline explosions and environmental policies that made the area uninhabitable. He framed these ecological injuries not as unfortunate side effects of development but as deliberate weapons in the colonial project of dispossession and elimination of Indigenous peoples. His activism and then judicial murder by a military government aligned with oil corporations, dramatically illustrates how lethal it could be to challenge any form of environmental destruction taking place within the Niger Delta. Habila's novel, published fifteen years later, returns to this landscape of destruction and asks what it means to witness it.

What Habila adds to this history is a sophisticated literary interrogation of witnessing itself, examining how journalists, NGO workers, academics and tourists observe this destruction without fundamentally challenging the systems producing it. Through Rufus's increasingly uncomfortable position as observer, Habila explores complicity: does the act of documenting and narrating suffering participate in its perpetuation? Does the gaze that bears witness inevitably become complicit with the violence it observes?

Habila's description of the Delta emphasizes its transformation into what might be called a "poison-scape," a land rendered toxic and utterly uninhabitable through sustained industrial violence. A landscape covered in oil slick, pervaded by the chemical smell of gas flares, populated by dead fish with bloated bellies, and dying mangrove forests with roots coated in crude oil. Countering the romantic ideal of the tropics, this instead, feels like a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Habila writes:

> The village was almost deserted. A few gaunt-looking women sat listlessly in the shade of the houses. Children with bloated bellies and running noses played with sticks and empty cans. The roofs of the mud huts were blackened from soot and the ground was soft and oily to the touch. The water, once clear, was now murky with oil, and the air was filled with a permanent stench—of gas, of smoke, of things decaying slowly in the heat. (Habila, 2010, p. 47)

The water is poisoned: it cannot be used for washing, drinking, or bathing. It was once important for fishing and subsistence living. Many villages lie abandoned or in ruins; their people have left or migrated because ecologically it is impossible to live here. Rufus meets people who with deep sadness tell him that they have lost everything: their means of making a living, their health, and their very sense of self connected to this place. One old man makes clear this basic dispossession when he says, "The land was no longer ours; it belonged to the oil companies" (Habila, 2010, p. 76). This sentence summarizes the basic change brought by colonialism and continued by neocolonial resource extraction: land becomes not a common home to be lived in and cared for but instead becomes private property to be extracted, used up, and thrown away.

The novel accumulates images of destruction in order to characterize not an environmental problem, but an environmental disaster of epic-scale and serious injustice. Habila describes, "dead fish floating belly-up," "mangroves standing empty and leafless," "houses leaning sideways, as if they were being pulled into the oily mud," and "nets, boats, and cooking pots left lying around in silence" (pp. 45, 61, 35). Each of these images paints a picture of a landscape in which human meaning-making has become impossible; the very infrastructure of community life has been abandoned; already, death is visible in every direction. Therefore, the Delta is something more than a natural disaster, it is an aesthetic envelope of horror, guilt, voyeurism and witnessing creating a scene outside of logic or sense. In his writings on postcolonial African ecocriticism, Cajetan Iheka calls this the "active suffering entity" of colonized land; the idea that environmental destruction is not a mere background to human tragedy but an active dynamic force that shapes human existence and possibility (Iheka, 2017, p. 45). The Delta suffers and generates suffering; its degradation resonates among all communities, both human and nonhuman.

In *Oil on Water*, Habila will not allow the Niger Delta to exist merely as a stage for human tragedy; the blighted earth, the dying river, and the polluted air are given an almost personified presence. The Delta's "poison-scape" is described as infected and wounded, a landscape that continually bleeds from oil spills, gas flares, and the violence of extraction. It is through those same waters and forsaken towns that Rufus, the journalist-protagonist, passes to find not just human suffering but that of the land itself. One passage describes how "The river was covered in a film of oil that reflected the sun like a huge broken mirror" and how "water which was once clear now looked murky with oil," while "the air carries a permanent stench," of gas, smoke, and things slowly decaying in the heat (Habila, 2010, p. 45, 47). Such images make the Niger Delta's ecological trauma material; nature itself is forced into incapacity, in a state of suffering that ripples throughout this entire region.

Iheka's idea can be seen clearly in Habila's careful description: the Delta does not just hold or see tragedy, it "suffers and generates suffering." Its degradation touches all who live inside it: children "with bloated bellies and running noses…played with sticks and empty cans," their illness and aimlessness are reflections of the "soft and oily" ground under their houses. Elders and fishermen cry over not just fish and clean water but a way of life, spiritual connection, and generational knowledge, all victims to the land's pain. Here, then, is where the landscape itself acts as an active force shaping fates and futures for individuals and whole communities while also acting upon their health and culture.[1]

The Ethics of Witnessing

What sets Habila's stance apart from traditional environmental writing is the reflective sophistication of the ethics of witnessing. Rufus participates in the same logic to which he bears witness. As a journalist, he is a witness to suffering, documenting its story to share with an audience far away. This self-positioning is not unlike tourism: observing without intervening; representing without accountability. The alternative, focusing on both the aesthetic and moral sides of environmental and human struggles encourages us to truly "witness", a concept Felman and Laub (1992) describe as not just reacting, but feeling responsible for what we see. Another journalist, Zaq, who is more experienced than Rufus, explains this criticism of journalism all too clearly:

> We go to these places, we see these things, and we come back, and we write about them. We sometimes win awards, and we sometimes get promoted. But nothing ever changes, not the oil, not the kidnappings, not the deaths. (Habila, 2010, p. 121)

In this passage, we see one of the main ideas of slow violence as explained by Nixon (2011); although the environment is destroyed, we cannot see that damage until it is "too late." While we see violent depictions of environmental destruction in the media through journalism, documentary photography, or academic critiques, we simultaneously cannot visualize or imagine the solution to such destruction. Thus, witnessing damage transcends into "merely" documenting suffering, which not only disengages the attitude of the witness, but the very witness to the suffering renders the action of narrating into a substitute for acting; the more we narrate, the more acceptable it becomes as the new landscape.

[1] These themes are evident in tropical postcolonial African representations of the Niger Delta through various forms of storytelling from novels, to theatre, to dance. For instance, in the work of Nnedi Okorafor (see Sakar & Rangarajan, 2022); Imbolo Mbue (see Karmakar & Chetty, 2023); Abakporo and Ohenhen, 2023; and Abakporo et al. 2025.

Habila exacerbates this paradox through his aesthetic depiction of environmental devastation. The Delta becomes oddly, disturbingly, beautiful precisely because of this destruction:

> It was a strange kind of beauty—the flaming gas flares lighting up the night sky, the shimmering oil sheen on the water, the silhouetted wrecks of oil rigs and burnt-out villages. You couldn't look away, even though every detail spoke of death and despair. It was like staring at a wound too large to heal. (Habila, 2010, p. 110)

This exemplifies how the romantic gaze, seeking aesthetic experience is a deviant and disturbing endeavour when the aesthetic object is environmental ruin produced by violence. The gaze becomes a type of necrophilia, exhibiting beauty in destruction and pleasure in observing devastation. For Urry, what is produced through the tourist gaze is extraordinary. Habila demonstrates how extraction and militarization produced and extraordinarily devastated variation of the Niger Delta. The beauty that captivates the gaze is an inseparable part of the violence producing the spectacle. This is not nature; this is violence produced for an aesthetic and consumptive experience.

Indigenous Dispossession and Epistemic Violence

At the heart of *Oil on Water* is the deliberate erasure of indigenous environmental knowledge and community autonomy. The river communities of the Niger Delta—fishermen, boatmen, farmers, collectors of forest products, have centuries' worth of knowledge about their environment. They knew seasonal patterns, fish migration routes, sustainable harvesting practices, ecological relationships between species, and the spiritual significance of water. This was not just technical knowledge; it was a cosmology that understood human and nonhuman beings as fundamentally interdependent. From this perspective, environmental degradation was not simply an economic loss but rather a rupture in sacred relationships and ways of knowing the world.

Oil extraction, militarization, and the imposition of capitalist property relations systematically destroyed this knowledge and the sustainable practices it upheld. Habila presents this erasure through scenes that illustrate epistemic violence. When oil company officials come in helicopters to survey the land, they totally ignore the villagers:

> They came in helicopters and boats, wearing dark glasses and suits despite the heat. They didn't speak to us. They spoke only to the soldiers. They pointed at things, took photographs and left. No one asked us what happened what we saw. No one asked how we were living now. They already had their story before they came. (Habila, 2010, p. 103)

This is an example of what postcolonial scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) terms epistemic violence; indigenous voices being silenced is a form of violence that makes communities invisible and dispossesses them from having authority to speak on their own situation. Smith further states that "To be heard is to exist. To be silenced is to disappear" (p. 143). In this scene, it has already been decided about the villagers before the arrival of officials; their knowledge, their experience, their testimony, does not count. They are not subjects with authority to interpret their circumstances but rather objects being inspected.

The novel draws attention to the silence and exclusion of women and elders, the very repositories of traditional ecological knowledge and cultural memory, from decision-making in land use. The Delta's communities, who lived sustainably for generations, are viewed as obstacles to progress, rather than being acknowledged as experts in environmental stewardship and community resilience. This mirrors one of the concerns raised by Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmental activist, scientist, and Nobel laureate. She identified the chief problem leading to environmental destruction across Africa as the systematic devaluation and intentional erasure of indigenous women's knowledge and agency. Maathai created the Green Belt Movement that involves women (and men) in planting millions of trees as they resist deforestation. This activism proved that communities, especially women, have advanced knowledge about sustainable resource use, ecological restoration, and an intimate understanding between environmental health and community survival and dignity (Maathai 2006). Development projects that ignore this knowledge, or actively suppress it, do not simply bring about environmental destruction; they represent a type of cultural genocide, the wilful extermination of alternative ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world.

Travellers: Ecological Displacement and Fractured Identities

Most of the people in *Travellers,* who are called migrants, come from places that have been destroyed by environmental collapse and resource conflict. One Libyan migrant named Manu has apparently escaped from political violence, but Habila makes it clear that this type of violence cannot be separated from struggles over the environment and competition for resources that are increasingly scarce. As climate change leads to desertification in North Africa, as oil wealth breeds corruption and authoritarianism, and as water becomes scarcer and more contested, political stability becomes ever more impossible. Manu shows the emotional and psychological cost of displacement: "Every night I see them in my dreams and every morning I wake up in this place that is cold, of which I have nothing" (Habila 2019, p.65). The affective register here is crucial and resonant. Displacement creates a permanent condition of mourning where home is at once vividly remembered, yet forever out of reach, while the present remains strange and cold. The novel underlines how travel for these migrants is not an act associated with leisure or adventure but rather entails deep precariousness, a condition characterized by legal unprotectedness, emotional fragmentation, and material uncertainty.

The protagonist observes tourists moving freely through Europe with cameras and suitcases, and his reflection captures the fundamental inequality of global mobility and freedom:

> I watched them—tourists mostly, dragging their suitcases behind them, cameras slung around their necks, smiling, free. I was jealous of their freedom, their lack of care, their obliviousness. They didn't know what it meant to be questioned at every border, to be suspected, to be humiliated for simply existing in a place that wasn't your home. To travel without guilt, without fear—that was a privilege. (Habila, 2019, p. 89)

This passage makes clear the often ignored difference between the movement of tourists who choose to travel for pleasure and the movement of refugees who are forced to leave even though they did not create the situation. The movement of tourists is praised as a way to gain new experiences or grow as a person; the movement of refugees is seen as illegal immigration and viewed with mistrust and hostility. Tourists think they have the right to look at things and enjoy them; refugees are looked at hatred, suspicion, and surveillance. Habila's novel argues that these two things are not different but are two sides of the same hierarchical global order that came from colonialism and is now being actively supported by modern border control systems and nation states.

Ecological Refugees and Climate Migration

The novel incorporates what scholars increasingly refer to as "ecological refugees," people displaced not just by regular war or political persecution but by environmental collapse making their homelands unliveable. Although *Travellers* does not explicitly use this term at all times, the displacement of many of the characters is related to environmental destruction and resource scarcity. Communities from oil-producing regions in Nigeria, those from expanding deserts in the Sahel, coastal areas being threatened by rising seas, and deforested regions—all become migrants trying to escape both uninhabitable environments and political violence made worse through scarcity and competition for resources. The protagonist says: "We carry the weight of our traumas with us every day, everywhere we go" (p. 179). This trauma is not only psychological but ecological: the loss of place, landscape, and ground beneath one's feet; the loss of water sources, forests, and fisheries that have given life for generations. It represents a complete break from one's material basis of existence and identity.

In *Travellers*, travelling is not just about being worldly or privileged; it becomes a source of emotional breaking points. The protagonist drifts through refugee camps, airports, and hostels; places that emphasize the unstable nature of postcolonial identity. His experiences also mirror those in *Oil on Water*: witnessing is not just a

neutral act. Whether watching an oil spill or hearing a refugee's story, the person observing gets caught up in the violence they are trying to understand. The tropics in the story are not the romantic imaginary of the overabundance of jungles, but fragile ecosystems under constant threat; sharply contrasting the touristic image of Africa as a wild, exotic paradise, and instead showing how the reality of environmental damage often gets erased or ignored in tourism narratives. In *Travellers*, Helon Habila notes that the experience of travel frequently entails a strong sense of loss and displacement (Davies, 2023, p. 214). It chronicles the tale of three African migrants who cross paths while travelling through Libya to reach Europe. The novel portrays the terrible reality of migration, including the abuse and exploitation that many migrants encounter while travelling (Davies, 2023, p. 214).

Habila's *Travellers* set across European cities, focuses on the lives of African refugees and migrants who remain deeply connected to their home lands—whether by the coast, in the countryside, or the forests. Now displaced, they feel uprooted from everything they knew. The characters often talk about a sense of loss when it comes to their connection to natural spaces: "Being a refugee is like living in a constant state of waiting, forgotten even while you're under watch" (Habila, 2019, p. 63). This sense of dispossession is not just legal but also ecological. These people, fishermen, farmers, and villagers—many from rainforests or delta regions—are now fundamentally without place, pushed out by war, resource extraction, or climate change. Their traditional ways of life are dismissed as outdated by modern capitalism. As Chakrabarty (2009) points out, the Anthropocene blurs the lines between natural and human history, making ecological crises and social unfairness inseparable. The story also calls out how the West plays a role in both environmental and personal displacement: "Every passport I saw was a reminder of how random borders are—and how absolute their control over us" (Habila, 2019, p. 91). Therefore, global movement is not equal to all; tourists and oil executives travel around easily, while those hit hardest by ecological disaster often become criminalized or are kept locked away. This reflects the long history of empire, where indigenous lands were pillaged for resources, and people's presence was erased or rendered invisible on the world stage.

Habila's representation of memory in *Travellers* highlights how displacement creates a kind of temporal fracture and existential homelessness. The past becomes vividly present and inaccessible, refusing to recede into history yet unable to provide stability in the present:

> There's a point at which memory becomes a burden. You carry your home with you, in fragments, in smell and taste and language, until the weight becomes too much. And then you try to forget. But forgetting is another form of exile. A second loss, deeper than the first. You are

> caught between longing and escape, belonging nowhere. (Habila, 2019, p. 174)

This passage speaks directly, though indirectly, to what anthropologists and psychologists refer as a "structure of feeling." In the context of displacement, a psychological and affective state produced by being severed from the place of one's home or land or territory. For those whose livelihoods were tied to specific ecosystems—fishermen without waters, farmers without soil, pastoral peoples without grazing lands, these displacements are essentially ecological; migration does not mean merely relocation but a cutting off of those relationships that constituted identity and meaning.

Conclusion: Decolonial Ecological Justice

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and *Travellers* emerge as major literary interventions in the way we see the connection between tourism, environmental damage, and displacement in today's world. The novels, through their deep engagement with the tourist gaze, reveal how some lives, some landscapes, and some types of suffering, can be made invisible or turned into a show for people to watch. They push readers to think again about what it means to witness something and what responsibilities come with witnessing. This shift is only possible if we place African scholarship, activism, and intellectual traditions at the centre of these stories. It is about learning from Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wangari Maathai. It is about recognizing that African communities have had complex ideas about environmental care for hundreds of years. Habila's novels add to this decolonial vision of rethinking ecological justice through African literary strength and ethical insight.

Habila's novels resist the reductive representational frames through which African landscapes and bodies have historically been viewed; frames that position the continent as a space of exotic wilderness, ruin, and salvage. *Oil on Water* dismantles the romanticization of environmental catastrophe by exposing how the Niger Delta has been aestheticized through the "tourist gaze," which John Urry describes as a mode of looking mediated by desire, spectacle, and consumption. Rufus's journey into polluted creeks is a reader's confrontation with the layered violence lurking beneath the spectacle of oil wealth. What initially appears as intrigue in a landscape eventually reveals itself to be a battleground for slow violence—Rob Nixon's term for incremental, largely invisible destruction, wrought by corporate exploitation, state complicity, and systemic neglect. This is violence that Habila insists should be recognized, not as background scenery, but rather as an ongoing assault on communities whose lives Judith Butler would consider insufficiently grievable. In so doing, the novel insists upon the moral necessity of acknowledging ecological and human losses rendered invisible by global systems.

The paper also highlights how Habila foregrounds the epistemic violence inflicted upon indigenous communities, the violence that manifests not only in degradation of land but also erasure of local knowledge systems and cosmologies. Drawing from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's critique of colonial knowledge production, this paper asserts that *Oil on Water* presents environmental injustice as inseparable from cultural dispossession. The novel reveals communities whose ecological wisdom is sidelined by corporate and governmental expertise; thus, it challenges Western models of conservation and development that devalue indigenous practices. By subtly invoking African ecophilosophical traditions and historical struggles such as those of activists like Ken Saro-Wiwa, Habila situates ecological resistance within a continuum of local agency, rather than external humanitarian intervention. *Travellers* takes that critique to the global networks of displacement, border regulation, and fragmented identities which shape African migration. The novel reveals deep injustices built into global mobility: tourists cross borders for pleasure, while refugees and undocumented migrants are watched over, locked up, and made invisible. The protagonist's movement through European spaces shows how the migrant body becomes a site of politicized scrutiny while the tourist body moves freely through landscapes curated for ease and consumption. Habila's contrast between these two forms of mobility not only amplifies the ethics of witnessing but also redefines the very notion of travel in postcolonial contexts. Here travel is not discovery but compulsion; not leisure but survival; not self-fashioning but painful negotiation of place, memory, and loss.

Ecological collapse is a direct cause of forced migration. *Travellers* presents this perspective by reframing global displacement as an ecological issue. Migration is seen here as environmental dispossession, an experience characterized by severed ties to land, disrupted cultural memory, and enduring psychological trauma. Habila considers the rupture not as an individual tragedy but rather as a collective wound that resonates through diasporic communities. The novel's fragmented narrative structure reinforces the temporal dislocation of exile, where the past always remains present and the present is marked by mourning that cannot be fully articulated. Thus, Habila's novel engages with contemporary debates about climate refugees in terms of how histories of empire, extractive economics, and racialized mobility are intertwined with environmental degradation.

Oil on Water and *Travellers* together illustrate how literature can function as a decolonial ecological praxis. Habila's novels do not perpetuate narratives about African suffering for Western consumption but instead centre African epistemologies, environmental ethics, and resistance movements. They exemplify a kind of storytelling that returns agency to those communities that have been represented for so long as passive victims of forces beyond their control in the world. This paper argues that Habila's work advocates for a decolonial environmentalism whereby ecological restoration and justice place African intellectual traditions and activism at the centre

rather than Western technocratic solutions. Further, the novels call for a reconsideration of the ethics of witnessing in contexts such as tourism, journalism, humanitarianism, and global travel. Habila urges his readers to move beyond passive spectatorship toward a more accountable, relational form of witnessing that recognizes complicity, dismantles the aestheticization of suffering, and acknowledges the political implications of how we look at landscapes and bodies marked by violence. His characters repeatedly confront the limits of seeing, an act that reproduces power structures when done without responsibility. In other words, witnessing without responsibility merely recreates what it claims to unmask.

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