The Spectacle of Militancy in the Niger Delta in Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

This study investigates Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, which depicts militancy as a sort of performance and spectacle in response to neocolonial exploitation and environmental degradation in Nigeria's Niger Delta. While previous studies have concentrated on the novel's ecological and political components, this study focuses on how militancy is intentionally staged to acquire awareness, question authority and reclaim agency. The problem this paper addresses is the insufficient scholarly attention to the performative and symbolic dimensions of militancy in *Oil on Water*, which are often overlooked in favor of interpretations that treat violence either as criminality or political protest. This gap in the literature necessitates a deeper exploration of militancy as a form of postcolonial resistance expressed through spectacle. Using postcolonial theory (Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha), the study investigates the hybrid identities and dramatized tactics of militants operating in a zone of marginalization and state neglect. Militant operations like as kidnapping, attack on oil infrastructure, and staged media interactions are interpreted as purposeful protests designed to recapture narrative authority and draw world attention. The methodology involves a close textual analysis of key scenes in *Oil on Water* that depict militant activities, with a focus on the symbolism and narrative techniques employed to dramatise resistance. Through this interpretive lens, militant operations are read as purposeful performances that aim to reclaim narrative authority, attract global attention, and highlight the injustices of oil capitalism and state negligence. By treating militancy as a symbolic and performative resistance, the novel offers a critical lens for understanding subaltern agency and the aesthetics of protest in postcolonial African literature.

Keywords: Militancy, Post-colonialism, Niger delta, Kidnapping, Spectacle

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria remains one of the most paradoxical landscapes in the Global South—abundant in natural resources yet plagued by systemic underdevelopment, political marginalization, and ecological devastation. The discovery and subsequent exploitation of crude oil in the region have brought not prosperity but environmental ruin, socio-political instability, and militarized resistance. Within this complex terrain, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* offers a compelling literary exploration of the lived experiences of those entangled in the politics of oil. Through the lens of investigative journalism and personal trauma, the novel unfolds the intricate realities of violence, dispossession, and performative resistance in the Niger Delta. This study investigates how Habila's portrayal of militancy transcends simplistic notions of terrorism or rebellion, positioning it instead as a form of performance and spectacle aimed at resisting marginalization and asserting agency. While militancy in the Delta has often been framed in political or economic terms as a fight for resource control or as criminal opportunism this paper argues that Habila offers a more nuanced vision. Militants in *Oil on Water* operate not just as rebels or criminals but as performers on a volatile stage, using acts such as sabotage, kidnapping, and symbolic violence to project visibility, demand recognition, and challenge dominant narratives. Their actions function simultaneously as survival strategies and public spectacles acts staged to generate media coverage, provoke state responses, and interfere with the way neoliberal systems make marginalized or oppressed groups invisible in the society. These performances, far from being chaotic or irrational, are loaded with meaning and purpose, and are deeply rooted in the socio-political context of postcolonial Nigeria.

This study adopts a postcolonial theoretical framework to examine the symbolic and material dimensions of militancy in the novel. Postcolonial theory, particularly as articulated by Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, provides an essential lens for interrogating the lingering effects of colonialism and the ongoing neocolonial exploitation of African spaces. Fanon's emphasis on violence as a cathartic and identity-affirming response to colonial domination is especially relevant to understanding the radical actions of militants in the text. Similarly, Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?"—resonates with the novel's portrayal of characters and communities that are silenced or misrepresented in national and global discourses. The militants, in this context, emerge as subaltern figures who turn to spectacle as a form of articulation, using dramatic acts to claim a voice and stage their grievances.

In *Oil on Water*, Habila intertwines journalism, environmentalism, and political critique to highlight the blurred lines between truth and propaganda, rebellion and performance. The journalist-protagonist's journey into the Delta becomes a symbolic descent into a zone where power, resistance, and representation collide. What he witnesses is not just the aftermath of oil extraction or the brutality of the state, but a theatre of conflict where militants, soldiers, and civilians enact scripts shaped by global capitalism, postcolonial failure, and existential desperation. The narrative suggests that in a world where conventional means of protest have failed, militancy becomes a language—an embodied rhetoric of pain, defiance, and spectacle. Moreover, the novel positions the Niger Delta not merely as a site of conflict, but as a symbolic geography of postcolonial struggle. It becomes a space where the local collides with the global, and where the consequences of Western consumption and African complicity are inscribed on the bodies of people and land. The aesthetic strategies Habila employs—such as shifting points of view, vivid environmental imagery, and nonlinear storytelling—further reinforce the chaotic and theatrical nature of the world he depicts. The spectacle of militancy, then, is not accidental but structurally embedded in the narrative design, inviting readers to see resistance not only in terms of content but also form.

This paper therefore seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that examines African literature through the lenses of performance, resistance, and postcolonial critique. By focusing on how

Habila reimagines militancy as a form of spectacle, it challenges reductive interpretations of violence in the Niger Delta and foregrounds the agency of those who are often dismissed as insurgents or criminals. The study ultimately contends that *Oil on Water* is not just a story of oil and conflict, but a rich postcolonial text that dramatizes the symbolic politics of resistance in a region caught between abundance and abandonment.

Literature Review

Militancy in the Niger Delta has remained a recurring challenge confronting the federal government, multinational oil corporations, and the indigenous communities of the region. At the center of the discourse is a persistent debate over the identity and purpose of militant groups: Are they freedom fighters striving for justice and self-determination, or are they opportunistic actors driven by greed and criminal intent? This ambiguity has sparked robust scholarly engagement, with varying theoretical and empirical interpretations of the crisis.

Austine and Ighodaro argue that militancy has emerged as a response to the chronic alienation and neglect of the Niger Delta by the federal government. They describe militants as instruments used by marginalized communities to challenge their exclusion from political and economic structures, especially in relation to the oil wealth extracted from their lands (3). From this angle, militancy is viewed as a political expression of regional disenfranchisement. This is further reinforced by Ibaba, who identifies alienation manifested in the dispossession of natural resources, the destruction of means of livelihood, and the endangerment of local ecosystems—as the foundational cause of militancy. According to Ibaba, the state's insensitivity to these grievances has culminated in the violent backlash witnessed in the form of kidnappings, sabotage, and insurgent attacks (13).

However, not all scholars maintain a sympathetic view. Tatuna and Karuzzaman note a perceptible shift in the motivations behind militant actions, arguing that some groups have veered away from their original cause of self-determination toward criminal opportunism and self-enrichment(10). This critique highlights how militancy in the Niger Delta has evolved from a legitimate protest movement into a complex network of actors with divergent interests. The Fund for Peace underscores this complexity by framing the Niger Delta conflict as an intersectional mix of criminal activities, including armed robbery, piracy, cult and gang violence, and electoral violence, all of which are amplified by militancy (1).

Okumagba further contextualizes the conflict within broader concerns of environmental degradation and human rights violations. He maintains that the crisis is fueled by the devastating effects of oil exploitation on local communities, combined with the failure of the federal government to provide effective responses. Although initially rooted in social justice claims, militancy has increasingly assumed criminal dimensions such as oil bunkering, hostage-taking, and infrastructural sabotage(29). The violent confrontation between the federal forces and local militia, as witnessed in the invasion of Kaiama and the long-standing siege of Ogoni land, reflects the militarized dynamics of state–community relations. As Ibaba notes, these armed confrontations have been adopted by youths as a form of resistance against perceived government tyranny (14).

The socio-economic background of the Niger Delta further exacerbates the crisis. Despite being endowed with vast oil resources, the region remains one of the most underdeveloped in Nigeria, plagued by extreme poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure. Hamza and Dala observe that these systemic failures, combined with the government’s poor policy responses, prompted the emergence of organized militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force. These groups utilized protests, kidnappings, and the vandalization of oil pipelines to register their grievances and pressure both the government and oil companies into action (25).

Historically, the foundation for this militant activism can be traced to the formation of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990, under the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa. MOSOP was one of the earliest and most influential civil rights movements in the Niger Delta. Its approach emphasized non-violent protest and international advocacy, drawing global attention to the ecological devastation caused by oil extraction (Ikelegbe 97). According to Ikelegbe, although subsequent militant groups may have adopted more aggressive tactics, many of them continued MOSOP's strategy of using media engagement and public enlightenment to articulate their demands.
In sum, the literature on militancy in the Niger Delta reveals a dynamic and evolving conflict. While some scholars portray militants as justified actors resisting marginalization and environmental injustice, others emphasize the growing criminal elements within the movement. The theoretical and empirical contributions of these scholars underscore the need to view militancy not merely as rebellion but as a response to decades of structural violence, ecological degradation, and socio-political alienation.

Perspectives on Oil on Water

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has inspired a breadth of scholarly engagement, with critics examining the novel's treatment of environmental destruction, socio-economic inequality, political corruption, and resistance. Set in the ecologically devastated and politically tense Niger Delta, the narrative captures the crisis of oil exploitation and the human cost of resource control struggles. However, the perspectives through which scholars have interpreted the novel vary, ranging from linguistic and stylistic analysis to ecocritical readings, socio-political critiques, and cultural examinations. This section reviews those academic contributions, drawing attention to the richness of the critical discourse surrounding *Oil on Water* while identifying the scholarly gap this current study seeks to address—namely, the performance and spectacle of militancy as a mode of postcolonial resistance.
Language in *Oil on Water* functions not merely as a medium for storytelling but as a tool for constructing ideologies and shaping perceptions. Ogungbemi, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), explores how Habila's linguistic strategies represent environmental degradation and social dislocation. He argues that the novel's discourse does more than depict ecological catastrophe—it actively constructs a politicized view of it. The language positions readers to engage critically with the ecological and human crises it represents (360). Similarly, Imossan et al., using Jeffries' stylistic model, delve into the way language encodes social values and ideological leanings. Their study foregrounds how Habila's diction, narrative tone, and character dialogues subtly indict the Nigerian government and oil companies, embedding a critique of systemic exploitation within the novel's stylistic fabric (114).
Beyond its linguistic texture, *Oil on Water* has been extensively discussed in relation to the socio-economic dimensions of life in the Niger Delta. Asika provides a layered analysis of oil politics in the region, framing the novel through a tripartite lens comprising the federal government, multinational oil corporations, and local communities. His reading illustrates how Habila presents the struggle for control over resources as a deeply imbalanced and conflict-ridden affair. The militants' emergence is rooted in socio-economic deprivation, positioning them as both victims and products of a corrupt system that prioritizes profit over human lives (146). In a related argument, Austine and Ighodaro interrogate the rise of "militia capitalists"—local actors who manipulate militant identities for personal financial gain. Their analysis introduces the paradox of militancy in the Niger Delta: while initially driven by legitimate claims to justice and self-determination, it has also been co-opted by opportunistic figures who turn violence into enterprise (3).
Ecocritical interpretations of the novel further underscore the environmental devastation resulting from oil extraction. Bose articulates the clash between capitalist commodification of nature and indigenous ecological ethics. Her reading situates the novel within the broader framework of the Capitalocene,

asserting that *Oil on Water* critiques the exploitative nature of global capitalism and(Bose) its ecological consequences (1). She maintains that Habila presents a stark dichotomy between those who view nature as sacred and those who reduce it to a marketable resource. Chukwulobe echoes these concerns, applying Murray Bookchin's theory of social ecology to argue that environmental exploitation in the novel is inextricably linked to the systemic oppression of marginalized human populations. He asserts that the same structures responsible for ecological degradation also perpetuate social hierarchies and economic disempowerment (165). In a similar vein, Edebor offers an ecocritical reading that applauds Habila's commitment to environmental consciousness. Edebor notes, however, that the novel stops short of offering practical solutions, raising important questions about the limits of literary activism and its real-world applicability (41).

Other scholars approach the novel from a sociocultural angle, focusing on the erosion of community identity and the fragmentation of moral values. Mohammed et al., drawing from Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," explore how oil extraction undermines not only the physical landscape but also the cultural fabric of Niger Delta communities. They identify territorial theft, aquatic devastation, and moral decay as key manifestations of this prolonged violence (111). Their analysis points to the militants' loss of cultural rootedness and the breakdown of social cohesion as key consequences of oil-induced disruption. Adding to this discourse, Hand conceptualizes *Oil on Water* as an eco-drama with four actors: the federal military, the armed rebels, the local villagers, and the land itself. His reading suggests that the environment, far from being a passive backdrop, emerges as an agentive force in the narrative. Through Habila's vivid prose, nature is imbued with voice and emotion, asserting itself against human violence and demanding recognition.

Across these readings, ideological concerns are deeply embedded, though not always explicitly stated. The novel's critique of neocolonial exploitation and post-independence failure positions it firmly within the tradition of postcolonial literature. Though not all scholars apply postcolonial theory directly, many of their insights align with the framework's central tenets. The militants' turn to violence, for example, echoes Frantz Fanon's assertion in *The Wretched of the Earth* that for the colonized, violence can become a necessary response to historical dehumanization. The subaltern's struggle for voice, explored by Gayatri Spivak, also resonates with the novel's portrayal of Niger Delta communities whose experiences are often excluded from national or international discourse. In *Oil on Water*, these subaltern figures reclaim visibility not through formal politics but through spectacular, symbolic acts kidnappings, sabotage, and public displays of dissent. These performances speak from the margins and challenge hegemonic narratives that frame militants merely as criminals or terrorists.

Furthermore, the hybrid identities of many characters, especially the militants and journalists, align with Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity. These figures exist in liminal spaces caught between tradition and modernity, resistance and complicity, local belonging and global exposure. Habila portrays this hybridity as both a source of tension and a condition for survival in a fractured postcolonial world. The militants' actions, while often morally ambiguous, are not devoid of meaning. Rather, they serve as a form of rhetorical strategy a performance meant to disrupt, provoke, and engage with the wider structures of power that continue to marginalize the Niger Delta.

Altogether, the scholarly discourse surrounding *Oil on Water* reflects the novel's multifaceted approach to environmental, social, and political issues. Critics have unpacked its linguistic nuances, exposed its socio-economic implications, interrogated its ecological messages, and explored its cultural resonance. However, while these studies offer valuable insights, the notion of militancy as performative spectacle remains a largely overlooked area of inquiry. This study, therefore, builds on the existing literature while carving a unique analytical space that situates militancy within the domains of performance and postcolonial symbolism. By focusing on how resistance is staged, dramatized, and

mediated, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of *Oil on Water* as a literary act of witnessing and protest.

Post-colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory is no doubt one of the most influential academic and intellectual discourses in the social sciences and humanities. It critically analyses the economic, political and cultural legacies of colonialism and its imperialistic nature, shedding more light on how these systems and continued to influence identities, literatures and institutions of societies that were once under colonial rule, from its origin in anti-colonial resistance to its current position in the universal academic discourse. Postcolonial theory developed and evolved through the contributions of major thinkers and schools of thoughts as well as engagement with issues of identity, power and resistance. Postcolonial theory began in 1960 and 70s the foundation is based on the anti-colonial movement and the intellectual works of political and cultural leaders from colonized countries. There were some major figures that pushed and kicked against colonialism and also played a crucial role in the vin articulating the psychological, cultural and social effect of colonization people like Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and Leopold Seghor etc. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) creates a vivid picture and gives a robust analysis of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and advocated for violent resistance as a means of decolonization (Fanon et al.). Similarly, Aimé Césaire's in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) revealed the hypocrisy and brutality of European imperialism, shedding more light on the contradictions within colonial ideologies. These early contributions foregrounded the themes of resistance, cultural identity, and liberation, which would become central to postcolonial thought.(Césaire)

Postcolonial theory started formally as an academic discipline in the 1970s and 1980s, as scholars began to apply critical theory to the study of colonial and postcolonial texts. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is widely regarded as a foundational text in the field. Said argued that Western representations of the East were not neutral but were deeply rooted in imperialist ideologies that justified domination. His work introduced the concept of "Orientalism" as a system of knowledge production that served colonial interests, laying the groundwork for postcolonial discourse analysis(Said). Said's work was soon joined by other influential thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, who added complexity to postcolonial theory through their engagements with deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and feminism.Spivak's landmark essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), raised important questions about representation and voice. She interrogated and questioned the assumption and perspectives that Western intellectuals could accurately speak for or represent the subaltern—the socially, politically, and economically marginalized subjects of colonial rule. Spivak's critique emphasized the structural silencing of the oppressed and underscored the limitations of academic discourse in capturing their lived experiences(Spivak). Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), introduced influential concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. He argued that postcolonial identity is not fixed but negotiated and constructed through complex cultural interactions between colonizers and the colonized. All through the twentieth century, postcolonial theory expanded its focus to include a wide range of concerns. Central to this expansion was the emphasis on hybridity and cultural syncretism, which challenged essentialist notions of national or racial identity. Postcolonial scholars also engaged in colonial discourse analysis, examining how colonial ideologies were reproduced and represented through literature, media, and education. In South Asia, the Subaltern Studies Group, including scholars such as Ranajit Guha, sought to recover the voices of marginalized groups within colonial and nationalist historiography, thereby deepening the theory's commitment to representing the oppressed. By the 1990s and early 2000s, postcolonial theory had developed into a universal academic discipline with a broad range of applications. It was employed to analyze literature, history, politics, gender, and even environmental issues. The theory

became increasingly interdisciplinary, intersecting with globalization studies, diaspora studies, and feminist theory. However, the global expansion of postcolonial theory was not without criticism. Some scholars, such as Achille Mbembe, critiqued the theory for its overemphasis on textual analysis at the expense of material realities. Others pointed out the risk of the theory becoming too abstract or being co-opted by Western academic institutions. In spite of these criticisms, postcolonial theory continues to provide valuable insights into the ongoing effects of colonialism and the dynamics of power, identity, and resistance in the contemporary world. Its emphasis on deconstructing dominant narratives and foregrounding the voices and experiences of the marginalized remains relevant in an era marked by neocolonialism, economic inequality, and cultural domination. The theory challenges scholars and activists alike to reimagine histories, societies, and futures that are not defined by colonial legacies but by the creative and resistant spirit of formerly colonized peoples.

The insights of postcolonial theory are particularly relevant when analyzing the theme of militancy in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Set in the oil-rich yet devastated Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the novel foregrounds the environmental and human toll of oil exploitation, while also exploring the rise of militancy as a response to neocolonial injustice. Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens through which to understand how colonial legacies and global power imbalances continue to manifest in contemporary resource conflicts. One of the central premises of postcolonial theory is that colonialism did not end with the granting of independence. Instead, its structures and systems of domination have persisted in new forms—most notably through neocolonialism, whereby multinational corporations and foreign governments continue to exploit the resources of postcolonial nations. In *Oil on Water*, Habila presents the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta as inheritors of the colonial mission, extracting wealth from the land with the support of local elites while leaving environmental ruin and social disintegration in their wake. This mirrors Edward Said's critique of imperial power structures in *Orientalism* (1978), which persist in new forms even after the formal end of colonial rule.

Militancy in the novel arises as a reaction to these conditions of neocolonial exploitation. The armed groups in the Niger Delta, often labeled as "terrorists" or "militants" by the state and media, are depicted in more nuanced ways by Habila. Their actions are rooted in a sense of disenfranchisement and dispossession—a point that resonates with Frantz Fanon's arguments in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Fanon argued that violence becomes a means of reclaiming agency and asserting identity for those whom colonial systems have historically dehumanized. In Habila's narrative, the militants, though morally ambiguous, emerge as products of a postcolonial reality in which the promises of independence have been replaced by poverty, pollution, and political marginalization. Postcolonial theory also helps to interrogate the symbolic geography of the Niger Delta in the novel. The region is not only physically degraded but rendered invisible or unintelligible to outsiders. This aligns with Spivak's notion of the "subaltern," whose voice is often excluded from dominant narratives. The people of the Delta—fishermen, villagers, former militants—are rarely heard in national or international debates about oil and development. Through the journalist-protagonist's journey into the Delta's interior, *Oil on Water* attempts to bring these marginalized voices to light, even while acknowledging the limitations of representation. Moreover, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity can be used to examine the fragmented identities of characters caught between different cultural and ideological forces. Militants are shown to be both rebels and victims, shaped by local traditions and global capitalist interests. Their hybridity underscores the complex negotiation of postcolonial identity in a world where Western economic interests continue to shape African realities.

Thus, *Oil on Water* becomes not merely a story about oil conflict, but a postcolonial text that explores the consequences of historical exploitation and the persistence of colonial structures. Through its portrayal of militancy, environmental degradation, and marginalization, the novel echoes the core

concerns of postcolonial theory and affirms its relevance in understanding the socio-political dynamics of contemporary Africa.

Textual Analysis on Habila's Oil on Water

Militancy as a Survivalist and Performance Strategy

This section explores how the militants in *Oil on Water* use mobility and temporary resistance as a form of survival and protest. Their camps are transient, not built for long-term occupation, but for flexibility in evading state violence. The proximity to oil infrastructure and the strategic use of threats against it highlights how economic survival and visibility are key motivations. Militancy, here, is more about drawing attention than achieving concrete political reforms.

" The militants always concealed the location of their camps, because their lives depended on that and the ability to pick up the tents and move with the first hint of trouble from the federal patrol that was in constant war with them".(14). In this excerpt the militants "concealed the location of their camps" suggest the survivalist approach to resistance of the militants and also reflects how the militants are able to draw the attention of the people, oil companies and the federal government by causing curiosity which is also evident in "Do you know where the militants are?" (14) This when Rufus who is a journalist asked a boy who resides in one of the villages if he has an idea of where the militants reside, this shows that the militants also draw the attention of the media. Their constant movement sheds more light on the fleeting nature of the militants making it less about creating long-lasting, stable political change and more about performing temporary acts of resistance. The camps are not permanent, which points to the transitory nature of the militants' actions—they are not entrenched in long-term strategy but focused on short bursts of resistance that grab attention. "What was certain, though, was that they never strayed too far from the pipelines and oil rigs and refineries, which they constantly threatened to blow up, thereby ensuring for themselves a steady livelihood." This part underscores how economic incentives are linked to the performance of militancy. The militants' threat to destroy oil infrastructure is not only about resistance but also about economic survival. This ties back to the idea of performance as a spectacle, the threat to blow up oil facilities is not just political resistance, but also a calculated show to ensure they are noticed by those in power (government and oil companies) and also to make sure that their demands are met. The oil rigs, pipelines, and refineries become more than just economic sites; they are symbols of power and also show how much importance the oil companies and the government attach to these things and provide a visual and political spectacle.

Militancy as a Spectacle for State Power and Criminalisation

This section focuses on how the state engages in its own form of performance displaying power through arrests, public shaming, and judicial theater. Characters like Karibi and Chief Malabo are reduced to symbolic victims, used to enforce control over the population. Their treatment reveals how resistance is not only physically suppressed but also publicly delegitimized through spectacle. Militancy is thus caught in a cycle of performance and punishment, where every act of dissent is met with a staged assertion of state dominance.

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"Karibi sat straight between two soldiers, his hands tied behind him, his face staring into the distant horizon. His son said he'd be taken to Port Harcourt, where he'd be tried and found guilty of

fraternizing with the militants."(20). This excerpt sheds more light and creates an imagery of how victims of militancy become an object of performance. Karibi in in this context is not just a victim of military control but also an object of spectacle to both the soldiers and the villagers. His "bound position" and "distant gaze" make him resemble someone in a display of power, as if he's being exhibited to prove the military's authority. His situation becomes another public performance of control and dominance in the ongoing power struggle between the militants, the military, and the local population. His exposure to the public transforms him into a symbol of resistance, even in his captivity. This passage illustrates how militancy is deeply entangled with state power, community politics, and corporate interests, revealing the performative spectacle embedded within these dynamics. "Chief Malabo was arrested, his hands tied behind his back as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of supporting the militants and plotting against the federal government and threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers." (40) The arrest of Chief Malabo, a respected traditional authority, on allegations of supporting militants and plotting to kidnap oil workers, signals a performative criminalization of dissent. Tying his hands "as if he were a petty criminal" is not just a punitive act, but a symbolic spectacle of power meant to discredit traditional leadership and enforce compliance. The state's accusation of militancy here functions less as a legal charge and more as a public performance of sovereignty intended to delegitimise opposition.

Militancy and Media

"I re-created with as much detail as I could the brutal taking of Karibi, and, as I wrote, his son's words came back to me: He'll be taken to Port Harcourt, where he'll be tried and found guilty of fraternizing with the militants."(28). In the excerpt, "I re-created with as much detail as I could" shows how journalism and media are able to capture events for public consumption. In this context the act of writing becomes a performance because the journalist decides what to shed more light on, dramatise and how to frame Karibi's capture. he'll be tried and found guilty of fraternizing with the militants" implies predetermined judgment. This shows the state's role in staging guilt, not discovering truth. There is no real trial, only the performance of justice. "I had seen his face alongside his wife's in the papers and on TV for the past few days. Oil-company worker, British, petroleum engineer, his wife had gone out by herself and she never came back, believed to have been kidnapped by the militants" (Habila 36). This brief observation reveals the way in which militant actions, particularly kidnappings, are deliberately orchestrated to capture media attention and global visibility. By targeting a foreign oil worker and his wife—figures symbolically tied to Western oil exploitation—the militants ensure that their actions become front-page material, effectively transforming violence into a form of political theatre. The repetition of the victims' faces on television and in newspapers positions them as visual symbols within a broader narrative about the region's crisis, commodify their suffering as spectacle. "A politician, who introduced himself as their senator, came all the way from Abuja and assured them that their situation was receiving national attention, it was in the papers"(40) Moreover, the senator's arrival "from Abuja" and his assurance that the issue is "in the papers" continues the theme of media visibility and performance. His role as a savior figure offering national attention is less about genuine representation and more about public optics a performative gesture aimed at pacifying the community without addressing the structural injustices they face. His theatrical intervention highlights the gap between appearance and action in state responses. "AND SO, UNDERSTANDABLY, this time the invitation to interview a hostage hung unanswered in front of the editor's office. The editor took down the notice, shaking his head regretfully. —I don't blame you guys for holding back, but I hate to see other papers out scoop us. The event is tomorrow and already three reporters have signed up, from the Globe, the Voice and the Daily Star" (48). This passage sharply illustrates the symbiotic relationship between media institutions and militant groups in the Niger Delta, where militancy becomes a curated

event staged for public consumption. The invitation to interview a hostage is treated not as a humanitarian emergency, but as a media opportunity a scoop. The editor's concern is not for the safety of the hostage or the ethics of coverage, but for being out scooped by rival publications, which emphasizes the commodification of violence and the newsworthiness of militant spectacle. "The militants, in black overalls, their faces covered in masks made of green leaves, fired wildly, and afterward three men lay dead on the pebbly beach. One was the Filipino; the other two were the reporters Max Tekena and Peter Olisah."(48) This scene exemplifies how militancy in the Niger Delta is dramatized as a performative act a spectacle not only meant to threaten and resist authority, but also to send a message to the state, oil companies, and the media. The militants' black overalls and green-leaf masks are emblematic of theatricality suggesting a deliberate costuming that echoes guerrilla identity while blending with the landscape, which is itself under assault. Their wild gunfire is less about strategic combat and more about symbolic defiance, making the violence highly visible and emotionally jarring. The deaths of journalists Max Tekena and Peter Olisah, alongside a foreign oil worker, underscore the tragic consequences of this performance. While journalists seek to document or expose, they become casualties of a spectacle they came to witness, highlighting the blurred line between witnessing and participating. The militants, knowingly or not, weaponize their visibility, but the cost is high not just to human life, but to the credibility of their cause.

Conclusion

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* intricately captures the performative and symbolic dimensions of militancy in the Niger Delta, revealing it as both a mode of resistance and a spectacle shaped by media, state power, and economic desperation. The militants' shifting locations, threats to oil infrastructure, and symbolic attacks are not merely acts of rebellion but calculated performances that draw visibility to their cause and survival. These performative tactics, while rooted in real grievances, reflect the fragmented and often fleeting nature of their struggle. At the same time, the state's response exemplified by the arrests of local figures like Karibi and Chief Malabo becomes its own form of spectacle, criminalizing resistance in public displays of power intended to suppress dissent and reinforce state sovereignty. The media operates within this matrix as both a recorder and amplifier of the conflict, dramatizing events for public consumption and often prioritizing sensationalism over justice. Ultimately, Habila's narrative critiques the systemic failures that gave rise to militancy and exposes how power, visibility, and violence are continuously staged by all parties involved. Militancy, as depicted in the novel, is thus a tragic performance: a desperate negotiation for voice, agency, and survival amid environmental devastation and political marginalization.

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