

# Ecofeminism in Bessie Head's *When Rain Cloud Gathers* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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**Abstract-** *This paper interrogates Ecofeminism from a comparative male and a female perspective. From an androcentric lens, Helon Habila's Oil on Water (2010) foregrounds interlacing relationships of both nature and the female folk on the altar of commoditization, objectification and subjugation with strong focus on the impact of petrodollar on the Niger Delta environment and their women. On the other hand, Bessie Head's When Rain Cloud Gather (1969) amidst other thematic preoccupation is first a pastoral novel that focuses on agrarian issues, land, drought, female plight, cultural practices and environmental issues. Both Habila and Head's as novelists are noted for their strong political undertones but this essay focuses on the place of nature and women in the Nigerian and Botswana rural settings. The novels are comparatively juxtaposed showing Ecofeminist's mappings as they heavily features "agro-cultural" practices that seemingly suppresses nature and women. Head and Habila represent these female characters as "Ecowarrior", groomers, growers against an arid and a polluted landscape. Head's debut novel anticipated it times in its depiction of ecocritical ideals, while Habila's text, though portraying a different political and socio-cultural milieu attends to the continuous abuse of both the female and nature in patriarchal societies. The essay uses Ecofeminism as a theoretical framework in presenting cultural issues that are tendentiously repetitive motif of both nature and women. The essay also presents nature as unfathomable, aggressive and indifferent. The paper sums that Habila and Head's portrayal of women differs. Head's women expresses female power through collective formidability in spite of their squalid experiences of aridity but Habila's women though strong, are portrayed as manipulative and manipulated. Finally, this paper appeals that cultural practices that appear to destroy nature and shackle women should be*

*strongly reconsidered and curtailed if not totally abhorred.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Bessie Head, Helon Habila, Ecofeminism, Oil on Water, When Rain Cloud Gathers African Novel*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Incontrovertibly, Bessie Head and Helon Habila's oeuvres have been noted for their socio-political realisms and not for their eco-feministic ideals. Therefore, discourses of their texts are predominantly focused on their inputs on politics, class and race. But, besides politics, class, gender and race, these novelists' artistic imagination and ideology are in the selected texts keenly directed to their environment, human and nonhuman interactions and gender. Both Habila and Head also implicate their various machineries of governance that superintend the rape of the environment and also proscribe roles for women to play or do not play.

It is key to note that, most of Head's stories are largely drawn from her personal experiences as a *stranger* and activist in her settings both in South Africa and Botswana. According to Stephanie Seingier in "Coping with Alienation and Attaining Psychic Wholeness in the Novels of Bessie Head: When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru and A Question of Power and the Realisms of the Southern African societies of Botswana" stresses, "Bessie Head's novels are all the more interesting because the quest she gave to each of her protagonists has been in some respects her own quest" (8). In spite of her robust political activism, the fundamental issues appraised in this paper are that of the ecology; female/male relationships and cultural practices which tends to constrain both nature and women. It is also pertinent to stress that the pastoral nature of Head's *When Rain Cloud Gather* anticipated 21<sup>st</sup> century ecocriticism and African feministic

thought process. Simply put, *When Rain Cloud Gather* was published in 1969 years before the term Ecofeminism was even coined. The novel unequivocally bemoans traditional practices that impinge on women and nature.

Helon Habila even as a male novelist write into the annals of ecofeminism. But the big question is, does he capture the centrality and nuances of feminine ideals? After all, the female folks have proclaim a lack of verisimilitude in the portrayal of the female character by their male counterpart. So, if Habila captures the ecological aspects, did he interrogates the feminism aspects wholeheartedly? Hence, this paper is also geared towards a male writer unearthing and representing the handling of native women and their land.

In recent times, discussions on feminism and the environment occupy prominent position in contemporary world literature. Despite the decades between the novels under discussion were published and when the ideals of Ecofeminism was propounded; one can only but acknowledge the laudable foresights of Head and her commemoration by Habila. In fact, Ecofeministic ideals are so obscure in the discussion of Head's that, Stephen Gray in the "Introduction" of *When Rain Cloud Gather* merely view the text basically from a political, racial and feministic positions, yet, little or no mention of the landscape, deep ecology and Ecofeminism were clearly explored. Hence, this paper is geared towards looking at some features of Ecofeminism encapsulated in Bessie Head's *When Rain Cloud Gather* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and how these insights are still relevant decades after Head's death and the publication of the text. The paper tends to argue that though Head and Habila have been read under the rubrics of political and socio-economic fronts, but they take giant steps to interrogate ecofeminist ideological trappings; and the portrayal and the advocacy for women and nature.

### 1.2. Ecofeminism: A Cursory Look

Ecofeminism, also known as ecological feminism is a branch of feminism coined by French feminist, Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It is a literary framework that sees connection between women and nature. It also a combinatory reexamination, and interrogation of the plight of the environment and

feministic movement. Core Ecofeminists seek to reveal the suppression of women and the destruction of the environment. In essence, the primary claim of Ecofeminism is that women's liberation is intertwined with the liberation of the environment from human destruction. Ecofeminism, simply put, is an umbrella term of two broad literary positions: Ecocriticism: the study of the environment in relation to literature and Feminism: the advocacy for gender equality and women's right.

Therefore, Ecofeminist literary criticism is preoccupied in how women and nature are seen as a means to an end; it also opines that this interconnection is discernible amongst all forms – exploitation of nature, oppression of women, class, exploitation, and even racism. Hence, according to Greta Claire Gaard and Patrick D Murphy, "Ecofeminism is not a single master theory and its practitioners have different articulations of their social practice. (2). Gaard and Murphy claim that the concerns of ecofeminists are hinged on:

Documenting the poor quality of life for women, children, people in the Third World, animals, and the environment, ecofeminists can demonstrate that sexism, racism, classism, speciesism, and naturism (the oppression of nature) are mutually reinforcing systems of oppression. Instead of being a "single-issue" movement, ecofeminism rests on the notion that the liberation of all oppressed groups must be addressed simultaneously. (1)

Starhawk observes that Ecofeminist challenges all relations of domination. Its goal is not just to change who wields power, but to transform the structure of power itself. (77). Also, Adams (1993) explains that ecofeminists see the interaction between social dominance and natural dominance, such as deforestation, which displaces indigenous peoples; hazardous waste sites near-poor and Black neighborhoods; industrialized factory farms, which eliminate the small family farmer; and international free trade policies that harm poor people and the environment. Women, along with the impoverished, are the main caregivers for pollution victims, and they are the primary sufferers of industrial pollution. Women account for the vast majority of those denied

basic rights to clean air, water, food, shelter, health, and well-being

Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein in *Reweaving the World* aver that:

Ecofeminist politics does not stop short at the phase of dismantling the androcentric and anthropocentric biases of western civilization. Once the critique of such dualities as culture and nature, reason and emotion, human and animal has been posed, Ecofeminism seeks to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life. These new stories honor, rather than fear, women's biological particularity while simultaneously affirming women as subject and makers of history. (xi)

Meanwhile, in Ecofeminism, nature is the unequivocal centerpiece of analytical preoccupation. However, the analysis is of inter- related domination of nature and women. Ynestra King has given some basic principles in the orientation of what Ecofeminism is or should be, thus:

- a. The building of Western industrial civilization in opposition to nature interacts dialectically with and reinforces the subjugation of women, because women are believed to be closer to nature. Therefore, Ecofeminists take on the life-struggles of all natures as our own;
- b. Life on earth is an interconnected web not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy, human hierarchy is projected onto nature and then used to justify social domination. Therefore, Ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of nonhuman nature, and Ecofeminist practice is necessarily antihierarchical;
- c. A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and non human inhabitants, must maintain diversity...therefore, we need a decentralized global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence. Potentially, Ecofeminism is such a movement
- d. The survival of the species neccissitates a renewed understanding of our relationship to nature, of our own bodily nature, and of nonhuman and nature around us...

It is pertinent to stress at this juncture that Ecofeminism refrains from consolidating itself as a single ideological orientation. One of the inroads that Ecofeminist have charted is the degree to which it pursues and reveals the quantity, range and quality of women's writing that has been ignored or blatantly excluded from serious literary discourse.

### 1.3 Plot of the Stories

*When Rain Cloud Gather* narrates a story of Makhaya Maseko, a political refugee from South Africa who flees to Botswana after serving a prison term for sabotage. He stays in a border town Golemna Mmidi (which means to grow crop). In this village, Makhaya meets refugees like himself who wish to survive the everyday harsh realities of a weather-beaten land, oppressive leaders, diseases, poverty, and strong women who struggle to overcome natural and patriarchal subjugation. Makhaya joins forces with an English agriculturist Gilbert Balfour who is struggling to help the people by introducing new agricultural schemes that would improve their squalid plights. The novel is chronologically written and also straightforward, the narrative is quite realistic as it portray the day to day experiences of the villagers.

*Oil on Water* is a novel about two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, who are sent to find a kidnapped white woman who is the wife of a British oil executive. She is kidnapped by militants as a bargain chip to negotiate for better treatment of the people of the Niger Delta. As these two journalists navigated through creeks in the Niger Delta searching for the white woman, they deeply saddened by the deplorable nature of both human and non-human material. They paint pictures of exploitation of both the ecosystem and the women foreign workers of the international oil companies. Zak and Rufus also note the shattering impact of war in the region. Many other subplots are also embedded in the story as white men take advantage of the native women and the aftermath of such relationships further stressing the titular handle-oil on water.

## II. FEMININE NARRATIVIZATION IN BESSIE HEAD'S *WHEN RAIN CLOUD GATHER* AND HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

Bessie Head's *When Rain Cloud Gather* was published in the 1960's and it anticipated both the prescriptive and analytical theory of Ecofeminism. *When Rain Cloud Gather* is Head's first novel and primarily focuses on power, class, racism, sexism and other ideas. Head herself described the novel as a "most amateur effort, harmless and amateur" but in spite of the humility, the novel is rich in depth and value. The novel gives vivid experiences of power politics, human exploitation and the destruction of nature.

From the early pages of the novel, the author takes us through the commodification of the female body. Makhaya the protagonist and a fitting male alter ego of Head's describes his encounter with an old woman and a girl child of about ten. The Narrative voice narrates how Makhaya experiences his first night. He "was startled to find the child looking at him with a bold stare. There was something very unchildlike about it and it displeased him. His glance flickered back to the old woman. She was staring again and he even imagined that he saw a gleam in the sunken old eyes (8). This child with "old eyes" and the older woman with the "sunken eyes" opens the labyrinth into Makhaya's education in his new environment that women are like livestock to be procured and sold at will. He comes to realize that the child has become a commodity in the hands of the older woman who "trades" her off to unknown and transiting men for financial gratification. He further narrates his ordeal thus:

He lay still as the door of his hut was carefully and quietly pushed open by the child and equally quietly and carefully closed behind her. She dropped lightly down on her knees and moved her hands over the covers until they reached his face. 'What do you want? He asked. The hands darted back and there was a brief silence; then she said, 'You know'. 'I don't,' he said.

She kept quiet as though puzzling this out. At last she said, 'My grandmother won't mind as long as you pay me.' 'Go away,' he said, abashed, humiliated. 'You are just a child'. (9)

Here, Head incriminates older generation of women for feminine subservience and servitude. She scripts poverty into the body of this ecocritical framework as being causal to female generational mis-education, subjugation, and objectification. The old woman is not only an unscrupulous grandmother but a woman who believes that the female body is an agency of negotiation. Later on, the old woman becomes obviously disappointed and surprised by Makhaya's responses. First, Makhaya sends the child away and secondly gives her money for "services" not rendered. The old woman is excited and astound. "You mean he gave you the money for nothing...this is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God! He must be mad! (10)". This is a mis\conception that Heads struggles to correct in her writings. Head is of the opinion that women have been so oppressed that a little kindness to the female is always interpreted as a negotiation for sex. Head embolden and upend this theme further in her short story "The Collector of Treasure" whereby Dikeledi cuts of Garesego penis, because she is always "abused" by this man who happens to be the father of her children. Head keenly observes that African women are mere tools and transactional sex is a core component of power.

Habila also stresses this commoditization of the female body as causal to the kidnapping of Isabel Floode whose husband James was frolicking with the local women. So the kidnapping is premeditated on several grounds. First, the kidnapping is supposed to be as a lesson to the James Floode who is not only exploring and exploiting the ecosystem but the women too. In recounting this, Isabel narrates, "He told me he was seeing someone else. He didn't tell me whom, and I assumed it was one of the many expatriate women" (190) but James is after the local women and has even got Koko, his maid pregnant. Unlike Head's Makhaya whose morality interferes with his sexual decisions, Mr Floode lacks the morality of staying away from the housemaid who belongs to someone else. It is from this viewpoint that Salomon while planning the

kidnapping laments, “It is not fair. How can Oga do this to me? I respected him. I trusted him, and see what he did to me?” (192). Here, Habila is stating that even a white woman’s emotion and well-being can trampled by male folks if they chose too, after all it is a patriarchal society whereby a man do as he pleases. Lastly, the kidnapping of a white woman can give the militants a broader audience in which they can make demands for the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta.

There is always transactionality between men and women Head observes. Some sort of morbid nego-feminism in the relationships captured in her novels. In these relationships, men are always the rule makers. For instance, Maria, Paulina and Mma Milipede are often depicted as negotiating their ideals before, during and after their marriages. For example, before Maria’s marriage to the lumbering Englishman, Gilbert, Maria is described as one who “who makes all these little rules and you cannot budge her from them” (29); and during courtship Gilbert is seen to “be bullied by a small woman” (29) and Maria has delayed her marriage with Gilbert for three years because she is aware that in marriage, a woman gives and a man takes and a woman dances to the whims and caprices of a man. But even during the marriage celebration, the village belle is instantly reduced to a wife. Her freedom and independence is immediately shackled. Maria is made aware that she is now a wife and someone else’s property. Gilbert had acquired like most men “a number of conservative ideas about married life- like it was the man who was the boss and who laid down rules” (106) and he puts it clearly to Maria, “You are my wife now and you have to do as I say. If I go back to England, you have to go there too” (106) and Maria assents to her husband’s wishes meekly because she is now a wife.

Just like Head’s women, Habila’s women tend to negotiate their feminine spaces and wellbeing. Indeed, Zaq’s great career is as a result of his reportage on prostitution and the female plights in Nigeria. Through Zaq’s rich journalistic life, we perceive his need for female emancipation which act as a springboard for his sole reason for taking the job to seek out a kidnapped white woman deep in the Niger Delta. Also in his Bar Beach stories, Zaq is portrayed as an advocate, a voice of females as homeless,

butchered and even lost metaphorical and literal. He is projected as a superhero called upon when women are “Raped. Brutalized. Strangled. Stabbed. (112). Judging from this period of Zaq’s life, Habila tells the reader that male writers are capable of cogently advocating women’s plight coherently too. This seems to stymied the historicized fact that men are in their literary representation are incapable of capturing or foregrounding favourable the importance and place of honour of the woman in a patriarchal society like Nigeria.

Though Habila’s female characters are few, but his ecofeminist messages are strong. Though Habila draws from the social realism of the era but here, the females are metaphors of strength and goodwill. It is the men that are demonized in Habila’s *Oil on Water*. For instance, Isabel for instance is shackled in a bad marriage and it gets worse when such a marriage leads to her kidnapping. She sacrifices her womanhood, security, joy and peace for James as seen in her bad marriage. Even when James wants a divorce, the decision is flung at Isabel rather than being discussed as couples or adults are expected to do. In all, marriage is foregrounded here by both Head and Habila as place where women are shackled.

Head’s female characters like Paulina and Mma Milipede also go through these domineering and indifferent treatments from their spouses in their marriages. Paulina’s husband commits suicide without reaching out to his wife for guidance and morale support. While Mma Millipede is seen as a pariah, a rejected and a degraded woman, it is quite ironic that these women are even more educated than most of the men but “in spite of the advantage they had over men educationally, few of these women developed a new personality. They remained their same old tribal selves, docile and inferior”(68). Apart from psychological scarification of women, Habila inscribes a physical scarification on Boma. In doing so, John, Boma’s husband flees from his wife whose face is half-burnt. This tells the fickle-mindedness of the male charcters who are wont to renege on the marital vows of for better or for worse.

Head also satirizes marriage as an epicenter for patriarchal unearthing. She presents a quirky notion of African men as lovers and husbands thus:

Which African man can really loved a woman the way they could all see that Gilbert loved Maria? By love a man stuck to one woman, but African men like the woman who stayed up the hill and the one in the valley and the one in the next village, all in the same indiscriminate way. (181)

For Habila, Head's umbrella classification is unjust. Habila is of the opinion that European men are as demeaning as African men. Hence, gives us Koko, a character, a maid of the Floode's which Rufus describes as, "Young and plump, not fat but very heavy around the hips...looked like a student than a maid...not conventionally pretty there was a compelling sexuality about her" (98) whose body launches several local and international news. Her body gains access to her financial needs by sacrificing the love and care given by her lover, Salomon. Koko viciously tells Salomon: "this pregnancy that you think is yours, it is not. It is the oga's pregnancy...me and oga, we are in love. He is getting a divorce from his wife, and he is going to marry me. He is going to take me to London with him when his contract finishes"(208). Koko's body becomes a Machiavellian tool. Her body dismantles the Floode's marriage and above all, Head's perception of African men against European men.

Because of this sexually aggressive nature of men, just like ebullient character of Koko in *Oil in Water*, Head also writes of daring women who take lovers, drink beer and smoke cigarettes. During the time of her writing, these actions were alien to the African culture; and women who do these are seen as morally bankrupt but Head tends to empower women to be true to their nature. Indeed, as earlier said this is a novel that anticipated theories and practices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Stephen Gray in the "Introduction" to *When Rain Cloud Gather* describes Head as "beer chugging and tobacco-taking" (vii); this free spirit is what Head bestows on her female characters. For instance, Paulina approaches Makhaya to be her lover risking rejection and humiliation; but at the end they find love and happiness in the union. Paulina's strength and boldness are not akin to women of Head's generation and women were groomed to be coy, if not obviously shy and uneager to ask a man for a date but Head decries this pretentious, docile, dependent and subservient portrait of a woman. Habila also portrays

Gloria a nurse in this fabrics of Paulina as forward thinkers and women who know what they want even taking the steps to create sexual connections.

Hence, both Head and Habila write of female subjugation and attendant freedom and calls for the emancipation and better treatment of women in any society, African and otherwise. Head writes of chiefs like Sekoto and Ramagodi who have harems of women and exploit their bodies and pockets. Habila and Head therefore appeal that, if women are treated respectably, they can make enormous sacrifices for their male counterparts and can even provide economic freedom as seen in their collective effort towards growing tobacco farms. Head's female characters through their collective farming assist their husbands who are in dire need of economic stability after losing the cattle due to drought. And Habila's women as nurses, maids and wives give their economic and emotional support.

Finally, before the advent of ever growing vocabulary of feminism with its myriad nomenclatures and tenets, Bessie Head has anticipated her times and has contributed to world literature through her portrayal of oppressed women in their societies and calls for collective greening of human relationships across racial, sexiest and ecological lines. Helon Habila understanding the complementarity of the female, even as a male, clinically implicate men as trouble making war mongers while female are the sacrificial lambs in these wars.

### III. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN BESSIE HEAD'S *WHEN RAIN CLOUD GATHER* AND HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

The world tends to continuously witness melting glaciers, unnatural decimation of large insect populations, cyclones, wildfires, oil spillage, high temperature, tsunamis, floods and droughts amongst topical natural disasters that emphasize that climate change is upon us even though humans would ignore or reject the notion of a dying earth. (Is Ecofeminism Still Relevant?) Though these are harsh and verifiable truths but many human population continue to disbelieve the fact that the earth is dying but Ecocriticism as a literary theory and movement is a

lens in which literature has joined hands with other disciplines to interrogate and negotiate better relationship between the environment, flora and fauna. Humans have had massive footprints on earth, the impact human beings have had on earth is growing visibly with the doom and gloom of climate change. There are two key ways in which the intersection of nature and women are explored; they are: value hierarchical thinking and oppositional dualism. In value hierarchical thinking, Ecofeminist are of the assumption that society through culture establish that certain groups are inherently more valuable than other groups while oppositional dualism are ways of understanding certain social and cultural binaries. ((Is Ecofeminism Still Relevant?) For example in some societies, men and women are not only seen as being different but as direct opposites. In all, inattention to the plight of the earth's well being and that of women is central to Ecofeminism.

Ultimately, this paper is dedicated to showing that gender and nature are connected. Here, very real collusion of gender and the environment is explored in the novels. One way to which to extricate this is through language and both authors have shown their ecofeminist ideologies through the use of language. In *When Rain Cloud Gather*, Golema Mmidi means "to grow crop" (23) and Head describes it as mother earth has earmarked as a "unique place" (17) and derives its name "from the occupation the villagers followed which was crop growing" (17). This settlement has defined roles for the sexes and "land is the central part of their existence" (17). Meanwhile, in the village, "the men attended to the cattle business and helped with the ploughing, while the women were the agriculturists or tillers of the earth" (17). So a certain time of the year, a large group of husbands and fathers wander off to fertile lands to graze leaving their wives, mothers and every female behind overseeing a lonely home front.

Unlike Head's comforting locale of Golema Mmidi, Habila's setting is dark and foreboding as he depicts and feminizes the rape of the oil-rich Niger Delta environment. He starts by capturing the Delta with feminine imagery as mother, nurturer and provider and how man's greed has upturned mother benefactress into a squalid landscape of brackish and polluted water with, "dead birds draped over tree

branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil: dead fish bobbed white bellied between tree roots" (p.8).

In his article Little Big Words: Social Realism in Helon Habila's *Oil On Water*, Steve Omagu opines that instead of the oil being a blessing, the Niger Delta and the "entire surroundings become an anathema to the people bearing montage of aridity, barrenness and scarcity; the river becomes a metaphor of death, dying and decomposition. In addition to the deplorable and foreboding unpredictability of the river, it is further portrayed as dangerous, uncontrollable and threatening because it is now polluted" ("Little Words... 22). Here, the portrait of decay and indifference to the flora, fauna and the human conditions are foreshadowed.

Both writers portray diverse environmental disaster. Where Head depicts drought and aridity; Helon portrays oil spillage and pollution. Where the locals in Head's novel team up to combat their natural disaster; Habila's male character foment more ecological problem by creating ecological degradation through gas flaring and indiscriminate oil exploration. In Head's *Golema Mmidi*, their arid land becomes a rallying point- an oasis of hope, peace and some positive transformation. In juxtaposition, Habila's *Irikefe* from its Uhrobo meaning is "First to become wealthy" stands against all the traits of wealth. The characterization of the setting leans more to a harbinger of death and decay than a place of wealth. For instance, the worshippers are seen to be celebrating the death of their head priestess before her actual death. "That is the head priestess. They have started the ceremonies for her death...she announced this week that she is dying" (120). Meanwhile, the antithetical irony is not lost on a comparative reader of the text as the Botswana community are working collectively to combat their natural disaster but the Nigerian society blessed by nature connives on all front to desecrate their environment.

It is inadvertently a truism that Habila and Head do not set out to write an Ecofeminist texts but the novels clearly draws out ecocritical concerns. For instance, the novel juxtaposes traditional versus modern agricultural political practices that incapacitates human existence. Both societies work under a value

hierarchical thinking: the leaders in government/chiefs at the top, males, females and nature respectively. Due to this, the leaders in government/chiefs in both novels exploit their populace and go further to entrench avenues to maintain their power structures by keeping their subjects perpetually in need.

In Head's text, Paramount Chief Sekoto and his brother the sub-chief, Matenge are against agricultural innovations that would prosper the people. In Habila, the government give bribes to the local chiefs to allow exploitation and exploration in the delta against the health and wants of their people. Even the schizophrenic Major in *Oil on Water* and Gilbert Balfour in *When Rain Cloud Gathers* can be juxtaposed to stress how power is displayed and how it displaces hence foregrounding Ecofeminist ideals. In Habila's *Oil on Water*, the Major is a character imbued with political power to express his megalomaniac quest for revenge. He is a loose canon ball on the Niger Delta always on rampage and using violence as a sole source of negotiation. He stringently employs violence to script his role as dictator as he pulverizes the poor militants fighting for their right. On the contrary, the narrative voice in Head's novel notes that Gilbert's agricultural innovations "caused the chief acute discomfort, especially his habit of referring to the poor as though they were his blood brothers" (19). Head's chiefs only ceded the land to the foreigner Gilbert because they believe that, "One day he was sure of either the young man would be completely destroyed, or he could completely destroy his brother, and he wanted his brother destroyed for all the family feud and intrigues he had instigated" (19-20). These men are portrayed as pawns in the power game in their societies and Gilbert obviously chooses to make his pawn a king by going against all odds to create a progressive society.

Ecofeminist query hierarchical notions and as such Head also implicates Judo-Christian religion that unequivocal commands human beings to "Kill and eat" and to take dominion over all making humans masters over flora and fauna instead of a respectable complimentary relationship. Head brings in the politics of religion by mentioning characters like Hitler and Jesus Christ. Through Makhaya, Head believes "black men have been captivated by the doctrines of Christianity. It took them centuries to

realize its contradiction...African could do without a religion like that" (140). Before the advent of Christianity, African traditional religion expresses a high level of nature love and Head hints at it. She writes of a back-to-earth movement and believes that even racism can be cured under this relationship as seen in Gilbert and Makhaya's friendship and brotherhood. She is strongly of the opinion that when the wretched of the earth pool in their strength, the stranglehold of power, classism and racism can be dismantled.

This back-to-earth movement is also represented in Habila's novel through the picture of the worshippers. They are described to have prayed health to a polluted and dying river. (121-122). African writers have always seen the need to input their literatures with traditional beliefs that have been discarded due to the advent of Judo-Christian religion. Some of these "old ways" before the impact of science and technology are still revisited as curative milieus. One can easily affirm Head's assertion that "African could do without a religion like that" (140).

Land is always a strong theme in African literature and Head and Habila are aware of this. Head succinctly captures the Southern African landscape. Just like Habila of West African stock who writes of moonlight tales told under gas flares. Southern African writers are drawn to setting suns and the great desert that creates a thematic nurturing wilderness. Generally speaking, every climate has its peculiar challenges and in *When Rain Cloud Gather* drought is given focus. "Even the trees were dying from the roots upward" (177), the severity of this harsh condition leads to famine, death of flora, fauna and human beings. Head here writes of the ruthlessness and hostility of overwhelming nature. She stresses that some traditional practices are destructive to women and nature. She observes that, overgrazing is one of the factors that causes drought as well as poor research practices. Above all, Head opines that narrow minded leaders are not only detrimental to humans but to the ecology. The people of Golemma Mmidi overgrazed their surrounding lands and refused to explore farther afield. Their chief are not eager for innovations and as such continue to create wasteland of a beautiful landscapes.



For Habila, the Niger Delta region is known globally for producing one of the best oil in the world but the deplorable activities of the Nigerian government, the greedy chiefs of the locality and the indifferent exploration activities of the oil companies has created a wasteland of the environment. The people continue to die of known and unknown diseases, aging uncontrollable while the rulers-politicians and military keep feeding fat from the proceeds of the petrodollar. Habila portrays the thieving activities of the government and the oil companies as they snatch ancestral lands from communities without compensation. To this end, the local youths take up arms as militants to fight for their right and for their land. Many are faced with forced migration and spillover into neighbouring cities. Chief Ibiram laments this ordeal of treachery from the local chiefs and its attendant realities thus:

They sold. One by one. The rigs went up and the gas flares. The workers came and set up camps in our midst. We saw our village change, right before our eyes. And that was how we decided to leave, ten families. We didn't take their money. The money will be our curse on them, for taking our land and killing our chief... we are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So your question, are we happy here? I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home (41).

These people who are supposedly expected to be the richest in the country are displaced and are made mendicants. In spite of the riches emanating from the Niger Delta, it remains one of the poorest parts of the country. The people are denied basic infrastructure and other social amenities and for many of such bludgeoning reasons, the Niger Delta has birth freedom fighters known as militant and as well criminals who take to kidnapping and oil bunkering. Nigus Michael and Abiye Daniel also buttress the assertion above that the anathema of the Niger Delta is unemployment. "Many young people were unemployed, so they joined the militants and engaged in vandalism and kidnapping. Another reason is that they were excavated from their ancestral land and had nowhere to live. The final reason is that many were with militant groups protesting the devastation of their environment caused by the oil companies" (218).

Ecofeminists over the past years have addressed topical issues that have been of interest to feminist, and ecocriticism as well. Head's exploration of drought is an exploration of an ecocritical notion of wilderness. Wilderness is sometimes described as nature that has gone unchecked. Wilderness can be positive or negative. It is positive when humans recline into unchecked spaces to reposition and positively transform and it is negative when nature severely challenges human survival. (Greta Gaard, "Ecofeminism and Wilderness" 1). From an Ecofeminist viewpoint, Head's novel falls under the category of wilderness and pastoral. Africa as a continent has been recognized as a home of the exotic and most times experiences arise of the exploitation of the land and its people. African woman's daily activities as captured in the novel shows strong connection between women and nature and the bond they share. Head notes:

African women were capable of pitching themselves into the hardest, most sustained labour with perhaps the same joy that society women in other parts of the world experience when they organize fetes or tea parties. No men worked harder than the Botswana women, for the whole burden of providing food for big families rested with them. It was their stick that thrashed the corn at harvesting time and their winnowing baskets that filled the air for miles and miles around with the dusk of husks, and they often, in addition...took over the task of the men and also ploughed the land with oxen. (108-9)

This pastoral setting shows how women collectively work to sustain their society and nature. In what Gaard refers to as "an ecofeminist ecological self", this women are eager to value human relationships in diverse fronts even as providers to men, as eco-justice activists and also solely act as mothers defending their children when it comes to questions concerning women and nature.

## CONCLUSION

Many readers of Bessie Head's *When Rain Cloud Gather* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* may strongly argue that these text were not primarily written to foreground Ecofeminist ideals but that does not occlude the fact that Ecofeminist ideals are captured in

the novels. Habila in an interview with Frank Bures unequivocally assents the significance of the novel genre:

I want to write about the realities happening now ...our rulers are not what they should be, our economy is not what it should be. So we cannot afford to write escapist kind of literature. We have to put our resources into shaping our future. There is no one to do it for us. You have journalists, you have columnists, but what would last is the novel. It is going to be there for hundreds of years. It is a document that will reach our children.

Ecofeminism is realistic in its ideals and Habila and Head interrogate the realistic repositioning of man's and his relationship with the environment and his female counterpart. This paper has observe that anthropocentric and androcentric ideals i.e human and male interest respectively must be hugely reconsidered. Therefore, man in his relationship on the frontiers of socio-cultural and ecological to woman and nature at all times should not be examined as relational opposites or as inferiors.

African land is a key aspect of African existence. Land is seen as sacred; yet, land has been abused just like females. Head and Habila call for a rethink and repositioning of nature and women in the scheme of things.

Head depicts the unfathomable forces of nature and women as seen in the deplorable aftermath of the drought on the people of Golemna Mmidi. She therefore appeals to readers to shun cultural and agricultural practices that are deplorable to nature because the backlash of nature is always devastating. Head's depictions of assertive and strong women is an encouragement for the women folk to take charge of their destinies in spite of the harsh conditions of their everyday lives. These women expand their usual cultural roles as women, mothers and wives to become counselors, providers and leaders as seen in the characters of Mma Milipede, Paulina Sebeso and Maria Dinorego.

Habila's female characters are not as agrarian as that of Head's but are as ecowarriors as Head's. In the quest to cure the dying and decaying flora and fauna,

sea and land, the Worshippers, by paying constant homage to mother earth assuage the pollution of the Niger Delta landscape. Female characters like Gloria who happens to be a nurse is to a large extent synecdochical to heal the physical and psychological trauma of the Niger Delta people. Characters like Koko abound in the Niger Delta, they use their bodies as entrapment for white expatriates who would want to not only scarify their land but also their bodies. Women like Koko are like the sirens warning seafarers (expatriates) of the monsters lurking beneath the oily water of the Niger Delta.

Both authors have stressed that these female characters are the real warriors of their societies. Be it the heavily agrarian Southern Africa or the richly polluted Western Africa, these women through a gynocentric (female centered) and adrocentric (male centered) viewpoints of Bessie Head and Helon Habila respectively, capture ecofeminism concerns of their times. They lend their voices to the plight of the subjugated, objectified and exploited women and nature and as such encourage their readers to do so in order to avert future socio-cultural and natural disasters.

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