

Aggression: A traumatic augury in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

Over the past four decades, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has experienced hazardous environmental issues relating to gas flaring, soot, oil spillage and incessant disposal of industrial wastes. Critical attention has been drawn to the environmental situation the region finds itself in. The sole purpose of the paper is to examine the extent to which trauma from environmental hazards and personal experiences trigger aggressive behaviours in characters like Professor and Major in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The paper avers that frustration is internal and typically a stimulant for aggression caused by traumatic events like the deplorable living conditions in the creeks and being forced to live and work in a dangerous area which seems upsetting for Professor and Major to bear. Hence, hostile and instrumental aggressions become coping mechanisms for the characters in *Oil on Water*. Hostile aggression is a reaction to pain, frustration and feelings of endangerment. Traumatic events often leave emotional, maybe chronic features of mental life. Major's personal life experiences affect his relationship with the indigenes of the Niger Delta region and cause several episodes of aggression which includes several attempts at incinerating some innocent villagers in the creeks. On the other hand, Instrumental aggression involves a motivating desire to attain some other goal which may include money, land, and sex. This is replicated in *Oil on Water* by the Federal government as it uses soldiers to forcefully claim the Yellow Island stating that the land had been bequeathed to the federal government by the late Chief Malabo who dies in detention. Also, Professor and his militant group kidnap Isabel Floode in order to obtain ransom, in the process kills some journalists and harmless indigenes of the region. This paper concludes that environmental degradation which causes aggression from Major and Professor threatens the mental state of the characters like Rufus, Zaq, Doctor Dagogo, Tamuno and Michael at the end of the novel.

Introduction

The paper strives to establish a connection between aggression and trauma. Trauma as a medical condition has been around in one form or the other since the late nineteenth century and from the start, its meanings, subject to ideology and fiduciary struggle, have shifted and transformed.

The term trauma, according to Ruth Leys, was defined "originally as the term for a surgical wound, conceived on the model of a rupture of the skin or protective envelope of body resulting in catastrophic global reaction in the entire organism" (19). However, the term trauma in Freudian theory has now come to describe the wounding of the mind rather than the body, as a result of an unexpected and shocking pain. This conception is emphasized in psychologist Elizabeth Waites' definition of trauma as an "injury to mind or body that requires structural repair" (qtd in Hortvitz, 5). Allen Meek notes that "the psychological theories of

trauma have explained how the experience of ... life threatening situations can cause individuals to suffer behavioural and memory disorders over extended periods of time" (5). Therefore, the behaviour of a man is as a result of pain he is exposed to and can be interpreted to be a reaction to the pain he feels.

Cathy Caruth validates this, as she argues,

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet (3).

Caruth's argument points out the significant relationship between the Freudian concept of trauma and literature, and how the traumatic theory offers critics a basis and framework to effectively tackle deep psychological insights of characters. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok concur with Caruth as a means of understanding the human mind, its motifs, and behaviours through fictitious works of literature. Abraham and Torok affirm that "the study of fictitious life scenarios in literature parallels the psychoanalytic search for ever finer means of comprehending people and their joys or sufferings" (11-12). Abraham and Torok are of the opinion that through the psychoanalytic theory, the readers are able to understand the human mind and relate with situations which bring joys and sufferings. Stal Bjorkly suggests that "the connection between frustration and build-up of aggressive energy or drive was postulated to be innate. The drive is only initiated due to perceptions of frustrating external stimuli". The "external stimuli" Bjorkly refers to are the events/experiences that lead to trauma. However, this means that for every violent action processed in the mind, there must be a reaction which in some cases is the aggressive drive and can lead to aggressive behaviour.

Jerrold Brandell and Frederick Perlman in their article "Psychoanalytic theory" on the cause of aggression say that "Psychological data support the view that hostile aggression is a reaction to pain, frustration and feelings of endangerment. These mental states can be episodic and situational, but they may also be chronic features of mental life. Traumatic events often leave emotional "lesions," which give rise to a continuous stream of aggressive wishes" (48). Professor and Major in *Oil on Water* manifest this aggression.

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is a well-researched piece of eco fiction.

Critical reviews on *Oil on Water* have been significant. Such reviews lay bare the pitiable condition of the Niger Delta and its helpless naked state.

Sokari Ekine and Firoze Manji in their reading of Habila's *Oil on Water* opine that:

A great reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, reveals that it is impossible to separate the actions of the oil multinationals operating across the Niger Delta from the actions of the Nigerian government. Hence, in exchange for the oil removed from the Niger Delta, the oil companies, with the support of the Nigerian state, have left behind ecological disaster, reducing the whole towns and villages to rubble, causing death by fire and pollution by the guns of the Nigerian Military... (27)

Sokari and Firoze implicate the multinational oil companies as the cause of the Niger Delta disaster. Through their actions on the lands in the Niger Delta, the Rivers, farmlands and the air have been polluted leaving the area in a dilapidated state.

Ray Ekpu opines that "The story of the Niger Delta people is the story of a paradox, grinding poverty in the midst of vulgar opulence. It is the case of a man who lives in the bank of a river and washes his hands with spittle: It is the case of people who live on the farm and die of hunger" (10). Ekpu uses the metaphor of a man living by the river to compare the condition of the average inhabitants of the Niger Delta region, implying that though the wealth of the nation comes from the

region, it cannot be proud of a single bore hole or well where the people can fetch good water to drink. The paper brings to play the negative effect of the oil boom on the region.

The reviews from Sokari, Firoze and Ekpu all dwell on the dilapidating state of the region. All these dilapidation bring frustration, chaos and violent thoughts which transcend into full blown hostile and instrumental aggression as we see in characters like Professor and Major.

Concept and forms of aggression

Aggressive behaviour can be driven by the desire to defend oneself against a threat or to take revenge against those responsible for a traumatic experience. Aggression is often a large part of a survivor's response in human beings. The individual focuses all his/her attentions, thoughts and actions towards survival. Aggression might be a response to negative experiences caused by trauma in form of frustration, depression and anxiety. Furthermore, the mind controls the physical and psychological parts of an individual. When a traumatic event occurs, the mind reacts immediately, and if the event is too upsetting, it triggers aggressive tendencies which can be dangerous as seen in *Oil on Water*.

Aggression can be defined as a dangerous or harsh behaviour or action towards another person with the intent to hurt the person. Dollard et al define aggression as "any sequence of behaviour, the goal-response to which it is the injury of the person toward whom it is directed" (9). Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman define human aggression as "any behaviour directed toward another individual that is carried out with the proximate (immediate) intent to cause harm. In addition, the perpetrator must believe that the behaviour will harm the target, and that the target is motivated to avoid the behaviour" (28). Johnnie Allen and Craig Anderson describe aggression as "a phenomenon that can take many forms, ranging from relatively minor acts (such as

name calling or pushing) to more serious acts (such as hitting, kicking, or punching) to severe acts (such as stabbing, shooting or killing" (1). They go further to outline several types of aggression, but the types which relates to this paper are the hostile and instrumental types of aggression. Hostile aggression is motivated by a desire to hurt a person and is characterized as affectively "hot" behaviour that is angry and impulsive. This type of aggression is also known as "angry," "affective," retaliatory," "impulsive," and "reactive" aggression" (5).

On the other hand, Allen and Anderson opine: "instrumental aggression (also known as "premeditated" and "proactive" aggression) is motivated by a desire to attain some other goal (e.g, money, social status, or sex) and typically is characterized as affectively "cold" behaviour that is calm and calculated. The harm caused to the victim by instrumental aggression is simply a means of attaining the other divided goal" (5). Anderson and Bushman also opine that: "Hostile aggression has historically been conceived as being impulsive, thoughtless (i.e, unplanned), driven by anger, having the ultimate motive of harming the target, and occurring as a reaction to some perceived provocation. It is sometimes called affective, impulsive, or reactive aggression" (29).

Hostile and instrumental aggression: Violence and chaos

A young journalist, Rufus, travels into the Niger Delta region, Rivers State to be precise, along with his hero, a famous reporter named Zaq. They are in search of a kidnapped white woman, Isabel Floode, who finds herself made a bargaining chip in a war between the government of Nigeria and its people. This war is being fought over oil, a resource in high demand. As they venture deeper into the waters of the region, Rufus and Zaq meet a number of powerful people on both sides of the conflict, but focus on the poor. Rufus, Zaq, Gloria, Doctor Dagogo, Michael and Tamuno

encounter death-threatening experiences in the hands of Professor, his militant group and Major, the court-martialled soldier. At the heart of the mystery, they find Isabel, and her driver, Salomon; have concocted the kidnapping as a revenge plot against Isabel's husband, James who impregnated Salomon's fiancée, Koko. In the end, Rufus must seek out Isabel and discover the truth behind her disappearance, while trying to stay alive in the middle of the deadly oil war.

Violence and chaos are the effects of aggression in *Oil on Water*. In *Oil on Water*, the militants imitate the behaviours of the Federal Government army officers. The federal government while using soldiers explore instrumental aggressive behaviour which involves cold, calm and calculated moves. In the case of Yellow Island, they are forceful and present a document claiming Chief Malabo signs and bequeaths the oil rich lands which is the goal to them. Chief Ibiram says:

The following week, even before Chief Malabo had been buried, the oil companies moved in. They came in with a whole army, waving guns and looking like they meant business. They had a contract, they said, Chief Malabo had signed it in prison before he died, selling then all of his land, and that was where they started drilling...(OOW 41).

From the extract above, it is evident that the indigenes like professor who belong to militant gangs like "Black Belts of Justice, The Free Delta Army and the AK-47 Freedom", take cues from the Military officers who use arms and ammunitions to scare away the helpless youths whose lands are polluted. Like the federal government, the militants express the instrumental aggression to attain money from the ransom for Isabel Floode and

protect their polluted land from further decay and they are organised, calculated and cold in their plans to achieve these goals. They get arms from foreigners to match the Military personnel. It is ironical that the same arms the federal army uses to scare the indigenes of the Niger Delta are the same arms that are now being used to kidnap oil company workers and prevent the Multinational Oil companies from encroaching further. Rufus describes the appearance of the militants, thus:

Our arrival was announced by more gunshots and whoops and calls, but the camp was clearly asleep... In the morning I was awakened by a kick in the ribs. I sat up, holding my aching side, and saw a man with a gun standing over me [a militant]...The man he pointed to was seated on the very edge of the patchy shade cast by the tree's few leaves. He was a fair-skinned, balding man in green military fatigues, mostly now torn and dirty... (OOW 198-203)

This shows the extent to which the militants have become bitter towards the government, multinational oil companies and the military officers. Innocent civilians turn into killers, in a bid to survive. The man Rufus refers to in the extract above is actually wearing a military khaki which shows that the militants have declared themselves a registered Niger Delta army.

In *Oil on Water*, some militants kill two reporters, Max Tekena, Peter Oliseh and a Filipino. This incident puts fear in the minds of every journalist including Zaq, the most daring journalist.. This discovery exposes Zaq's personality as someone who is not so daring and fearless as Rufus perceives him to be as he is reluctant to go on a search for Isabel Floode, the lady the militants kidnap. Zaq exposes his fears when he says: "What about those two reporters shot in the back on a similar assignment just weeks ago?" (OOW 33).

The militants are not only aggressive but the Federal soldiers are too. They attack innocent villagers and accuse them falsely about collaborating with militants and they arrest indigenes indiscriminately and inflict injuries on them. This happens when the soldiers invade a village as Rufus narrates:

There was a loud noise as of stampeding feet, dust rose and covered the tight passages... then a single gunshot rang out. They are here. The soldiers are here. They came out of the sheds and houses and passages, wielding whips and guns, occasionally firing into the air to create more chaos. A man ran out of a hut and came face-to-face with a soldier, he raised his hands high in surrender... the soldier reversed his rifle and swung the butt at the man's head... I was saved from a broken jaw or a cracked skull (OOW 12).

Frustration is the main cause of hostile and instrumental aggression in most cases, especially in *Oil on Water* as regards militancy, chaos and violence in the Niger Delta region. Some elements of frustration

come as a result of pains from personal experiences which are tortuous. The Major is a victim of injustice. His daughter's rape inflicts psychological pain on him and in addition to that, the Federal Army court-martials him and sends him to the Niger Delta creeks as punishment. All these incidents worsen his anger and make him so aggressive towards the innocent indigenes of the region. His daughter's rape triggers his hostile aggressive behaviour. This goes to show how personal experiences aggravate the state of things in Niger Delta. The climax of his hostile aggressive behaviour is the deliberate torture Major inflicts on Tamuno, Michael and the other innocent villagers whom he arrests by pouring crude oil on their bodies and threatening to set them ablaze. Doctor Dagogo narrates to Rufus the present state of mind the Major is in now, as he says:

They say he became like this after his daughter was raped... The major here, he took it calmly, surprisingly. Many thought he'd lose his head and maybe shoot the boy, and in anticipation of this the boy's father sent his son away to a university in London. Well, the Major is a patient man (OOW 56-57).

This shows how persons react to traumatic events differently. The Major carries the pain he feels for some time and carefully plans his revenge on the culprit. The Major's calmness is an attempt to revenge when no one expects it, as Dagogo explains further:

They took him to the graveyard and shot him in the groin after breaking his four limbs. He didn't die... The major was arrested, and court-martialed. The army sent him away to

this place as a punishment, and he has been here three years now. One day he's going to light that match. Even his men know it. Just a matter of time (OOW 57).

The Major vents his frustrations from injustice and the punishment he gets on the innocent indigenes. Major is conceived as being impulsive, thoughtless (i.e, unplanned), driven by anger, having the ultimate motive of harming the target, and occurring as a reaction to some perceived provocation. His aggression is retaliatory, impulsive and reactive and highly driven by anger as we see in his treatment of his prisoners. This provocation is caused by his deployment to the creeks, the dilapidating state of the region and the militants like Professor who keeps terrorizing the creeks. The climax of his frustration is his ritual of bathing his prisoners with crude oil while he mocks and reminds them about their dilapidating ecosystem and their hopeless situations. He says in these words:

-What, you can't stand the smell of oil? Isn't it what you fight for, kill for? Go on, enjoy. By the time I'm through with you, you'll hate the smell of it, you won't take money that comes from oil, you won't get in a car because it runs on petrol. You'll hate the very name petrol...-You want resource control? well, control this. How does it feel? This will teach you to kidnap innocent children. This will teach you to terrorize innocent villages...-sergeant! Get me more petrol. These people are so thirsty... (OOW 56)

Rufus portrays the Major as a damaged person whose personal experiences now cloud his judgement about the Niger Delta indigenes especially the ones he accuses of being militants. Major's mentality about the world changes as he sees innocent villagers as militants who want to kidnap and kill innocent

indigenes that he places in his daughter's shoes and tries everything humanly possible to defeat the militants. A Major whose personality is expected to be a strong one is seen as weak as he avenges his daughter's rape. He is so emotional, this goes to show how pain in whatever form affect the behaviours of persons in different situations and man's real personality reveals itself by sparking up the unconscious aspects of the mind which is in total control.

The aggression the militants in the Niger Delta express comprises both the hostile and instrumental aggression. These militants destroy oil pipelines, kidnap oil workers and in most cases kill innocent indigenes they accuse of conspiring with the federal government. They do these with the sole aim of desiring to obtain financial uplift as payment for destabilizing their environment, thereby, making them hungry, and homeless, sickly and hopeless. Since there is a motive behind the aggressive behaviour, which is not only to express frustrations but a way to receive monies as compensation for the damaging environment, then the approach becomes an instrumental approach to aggression.

However, the militants also employ the hostile approach to aggression by expressing anger, which may lead to stabbing, shooting and punching as the case may be. A typical example of this is the killing of Tekena Max, Peter Oliseh and the Filipino, while they attempt to escape. The instrumental and hostile types of aggression can be interfaced. An aggressive individual might possess elements of the instrumental and hostile aggression respectively. It should be noted however, that aggression stems up in *Oil on Water* in the minds of characters as a result of injustice and sheer deprivation.

Rufus points out as he laments on the psychological state of mind of the youths in the Niger Delta region. He points the moral decadence, insensitivity of the youths towards the federal government and oil companies and how the population of

the area deteriorates through dangerous diseases, militancy and deaths of innocent indigenes by flames from vandalized pipelines. He says: "I had seen that kind of anger before in many of my friends, people I went to school with; some of them were now in the forests with the fighters, some of them had made millions from ransom money, but a lot of them were dead" (*OOW* 90). It is a pity that the productive population in the Niger Delta region have chosen militancy as a way out of their helpless situation. Feelings of deprivation, disillusionment, abandonment, helplessness takes over their psyche which in turn bring feelings of rebellion, frustration, hurt. The youths are more determined to stop the federal government and oil companies from encroaching on their lands if it means sacrificing their lives to achieve this. Rufus loses many childhood friends and classmates to the struggle for the survival of the region.

Rufus also tries to justify the fights, frustrations and aggressive behaviours of the youths in the region as he educates James Floode on the happenings in the region and how the Federal government and the multinational oil companies transform the youths into becoming thugs and menaces to the country as he says:

"There are countless villages going up in smoke daily. Well, this place, Junction, went up in smoke because of an accident associated with this vandalism, as you call it. But I don't blame them for wanting to get some benefits out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold

great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions any oil - producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care. And you think people are corrupt? No, they are hungry, and tired." (*OOW* 97)

Rufus corrects James' impression about the Niger Delta youths. He blames the whole problem of the region on the federal government and multinational oil companies and how nonchalant and corrupt they are towards the needs of the region. Rufus justifies that the youth's brutality, restlessness, aggression as a reaction to deprivation and part of their fight for and survival.

Rufus reveals another terrorizing aggressive moment with the Niger Delta militants in the creeks. He exposes how familiar they are with the creeks and how predatory they can be while getting their targets. In his words:

They must have been watching us and waiting, as we were, for nightfall... The roar of their speedboats was deafening, the glare of their flashlights blinded our eyes and threw the women and children into panic and confusion. Some of the women and children started to jump into the shadow water, some threw themselves below the benches, but, above the cries and wails of women and even men, one voice rose and tried to maintain calm. (*OOW* 195)

The wails from the men, women and children depict how dangerous and terrifying an encounter with militants can be. The struggle for survival is paramount for Chief Ibiram and his family. There have been reports about incessant killings by aggressive militants. The militants re-kidnap Isabel along with one person from the group. Their hostile aggression is expressed thus:

Again a flash and the rude sound of gunfire, followed by silence...-well since no one is willing to come, we will take this boy here. – Nooo! Abeg. Please! Noo! The cry came from the old man as the men approached our boats; he threw himself at them as they began to drag Michael out of the boat, his puny arms rising and falling ineffectually against the men's burly frames, but still he fought them, his rage churning up the water.. I saw a gun rise and then descend on the old man's head and he slumped against the boat and then into the water. (OOW 197-198)

The Major also gives insights about Professor to Rufus, when he says:

I'll tell you what you know: he used to work for an oil company, and one day he grew disgusted with the environmental abuse and he became a militant to fight for change... The doctor can tell you about the deserted villages around here. They used to be well populated, you know, thriving. Now the people have all packed their things and left because of violence. People like the professor are

responsible for that, they call themselves freedom fighters, but they are rebels, terrorists, kidnappers... they just kidnapped a three year old girl in Port Harcourt, and you know what, her family is not connected to the oil industry. (OOW 148)

The Professor defends himself when he says:

We will make it so hot for the government and the oil companies that they will be forced to pull out... we are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for people, what will we gain if we terrorize them?... I am aware that, out there, there are criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies. That is why I am letting you go, so you can write the truth. (OOW 220-221)

Professor exposes a hidden aspect about himself; a truth in his conversation with Rufus whom he believes will properly educate the general public about who he really is. By granting an interview to Rufus, Professor shows the little care and kindness in his heart despite how the Major portrays him to be a wicked thug, assassin and a beast. Despite Professor's militant nature, his inner mind does not seem as callous as Major presents it to be. According to Professor, he fights for a just course. His behaviour is as a result of the shabby treatment and neglect from the government and multinational oil companies. His reply shows he has a conscience and is not as brutal as the general public perceive him to be. Professor represents one out of many

militants whom has a bright future but whose dreams are shattered as a result of the malnourished Niger Delta region.

The pain Professor and other militants feel from the federal government and Multinational Oil Company's betrayal, reinforces rebellion, war, hate which leads to aggression. Their main aim is to protect the Niger Delta environment from the enemies of the region that continuously destroy as a result of selfish desires. He does this by kidnapping oil company workers as means to survive by receiving ransoms from monies gotten from their suffering region to prevent further encroachment.

Chineye Ugwu justifies that the reaction of the Niger Delta indigenes is as a result of victimization, rejection, abandonment, displacement and helplessness and how these effects affect the psyche of the youths especially. She asserts that: "A conscious or even unconscious erosion of the human mind is but an attack on the human dignity and a significant issue in the Niger Delta environment. The mind under the impact of environmental degradation is eroded of its illuminating quality and consequently drives many of the characters in a state of atrophy" (109).

Ugwu in her assertion, exposes the nature of man and how when found in difficult and troubling situations, the unconscious comes to play especially when survival, and dignity is threatened. When man is in trauma, several means to express himself comes into his mind and his ability to pick one means comes to play.

Conclusion

The paper provides insights to define aggression, its types; which includes the hostile and instrumental types which are found to be suitable in exploring the various motifs for aggression in characters like Professor and Major in *Oil on Water*. It also provides insights to understand the characters, thereby exposing their true nature as they are perceived by other

characters since the novels were written in first person participant point of view. Postulations and definitions from Craig Anderson, Jonnie Allen, Dollard et al and Bjorkly, Abraham, Torok, Brandell and Perlman help to get better understanding of the causes and effects of aggression on the Niger Delta indigenes as represented by the characters in *Oil on Water*. Some characters who were discovered to possess such aggressive traits are Major, Professor and all the militants in *Oil on Water*. Some effects of aggression in the novel were the killing of innocent reporters like Tekena Max, Sunday Oliseh and the Filipino amongst others. Degradation threatens the peace of mind of most characters in both novels and brings out new aspects in their personalities.

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