



ENVIRONMENTAL EXPLOITATION AND INDIGENOUS DEFIANCE: A PETRO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF MBUE'S *HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE* AND HABILO'S *OIL ON WATER*

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Abstract

The Niger Delta has remained one of the most contested regions due to extensive oil extraction and its severe environmental consequences. This study investigates environmental exploitation and indigenous resistance in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila through the theoretical perspective of Petropolitics. The selected novels portray the destructive impact of multinational oil corporations on indigenous communities, emphasizing ecological devastation, socio-economic marginalization, and the political tensions that arise from the control of oil resources. Although a considerable body of scholarship has examined environmental crises and resource conflicts in the Niger Delta, relatively little attention has been given to interpreting these narratives through a petropolitical framework that highlights the relationship between oil wealth, political authority, and indigenous resistance. Using a qualitative and interpretive research approach, this study applies the concept of petropolitics to examine how oil operates not merely as a natural resource but as a central force shaping political structures, economic disparities, and social relations in the region. The analysis demonstrates that the dominance of oil-driven economies leads to environmental degradation, community displacement, and widening socio-economic inequalities among local populations. At the same time, the narratives foreground different modes of resistance, ranging from personal acts of defiance to organized collective struggles, illustrating the resilience and determination of indigenous communities confronting petro-capitalist domination. The study highlights how these literary works reveal the complex dynamics of oil politics and expose the struggles of Niger Delta communities within the broader framework of global energy capitalism.

Keywords: *Environmental Degradation, Environmental Exploitation, Indigenous Resistance, Niger Delta, Oil Economy, Petropolitics, Resistance*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

The Niger Delta of Nigeria has long been recognized as one of the world's most resource-rich yet socio-economically marginalized regions due to extensive oil exploration and production. Since the discovery of commercial oil in the late 1950s, multinational corporations and state authorities have played dominant roles in the extraction of petroleum resources, profoundly transforming the environmental, political, and socio-economic landscape of the region. Continuous oil drilling, pipeline leaks, and gas flaring have contributed to severe ecological degradation, including the contamination of water bodies, destruction of farmlands, and loss of biodiversity. These environmental crises have significantly disrupted the livelihoods of indigenous communities whose survival largely depends on fishing and agriculture. As a result, the Niger Delta has become a focal point for examining the intricate relationship between natural resources, environmental justice, and political power within oil-producing societies.

Literary works emerging from or depicting the Niger Delta increasingly reflect these realities by portraying the lived experiences of communities affected by the politics of oil. Novels such as *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila offer powerful narratives that illustrate the ecological devastation, socio-economic hardships, and forms of resistance that characterize oil-affected regions. These texts foreground the tensions between multinational oil corporations, state authorities, and indigenous populations, revealing how control over petroleum resources shapes political authority and social inequalities. Within this context, the theoretical lens of petropolitics provides a useful framework for understanding how oil influences governance, economic structures, and community responses. By examining these literary representations, the present research seeks to situate environmental exploitation and indigenous resistance within the broader dynamics of oil-driven political and economic power.

The discovery and exploitation of petroleum resources have profoundly shaped the socio-political and environmental realities of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. For decades, the region has experienced extensive oil extraction carried out by multinational corporations in collaboration with state authorities, resulting in severe ecological degradation and socio-economic marginalization of indigenous communities. Oil spills, gas flaring, and land contamination have significantly disrupted the traditional livelihoods of local populations who depend on farming and fishing. Consequently, the Niger Delta has become a prominent site for examining the complex relationship between natural resources, environmental justice, and political power. These realities have also generated persistent tensions between corporate interests, governmental structures, and the indigenous communities struggling to protect their land and livelihoods.

In contemporary African literature, writers have increasingly engaged with these realities by portraying the environmental and political consequences of oil exploitation. Literary narratives set in or inspired by the Niger Delta highlight the lived experiences of communities affected by resource extraction and expose the structural inequalities embedded in the global oil economy. Novels such as *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila offer compelling depictions of ecological devastation, social injustice, and the struggles of indigenous populations confronting powerful oil interests. Through their narratives, these works reveal how oil functions not merely as an economic commodity but as a central force shaping political authority, environmental policies, and community resistance.

Within this context, the concept of **petropolitics** provides a significant theoretical framework for analyzing the political and social implications of oil. Petropolitics examines how the control and distribution of petroleum resources influence governance, economic power, and social relations within oil-producing regions. Applying this perspective to literary texts enables a deeper understanding of how narratives reflect the intersections between environmental exploitation, political dominance, and indigenous resistance. By analyzing the selected novels through the lens of petropolitics, this research explores how literature represents the struggles of marginalized communities while revealing the broader dynamics of oil-driven power structures in contemporary African societies.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the growing body of scholarship addressing environmental degradation and resource conflicts in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, limited attention has been devoted to examining literary representations of these realities through the theoretical lens of petropolitics. While existing studies frequently explore ecological damage, corporate exploitation, and social unrest in relation to oil extraction, they often overlook how petroleum functions as a political force that shapes power relations, governance structures, and indigenous responses within affected communities. Novels such as *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila present compelling portrayals of environmental devastation and the struggles of indigenous populations confronting multinational oil interests. However, these texts remain insufficiently examined within a petropolitical framework that foregrounds the relationship between oil, political authority, and resistance. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by analyzing how the selected novels depict environmental exploitation and indigenous defiance as outcomes of the power dynamics embedded within oil-driven political and economic systems.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To analyze how petropolitical power influences the depiction of environmental exploitation and socio-economic marginalization in the selected novels.

- To examine the literary representation of the environmental and social consequences of oil extraction on indigenous communities in the Niger Delta.
- To explore the various forms of indigenous resistance and defiance portrayed in the novels in response to oil-driven political and economic structures.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How does petropolitical power shape the representation of environmental exploitation and socio-economic marginalization in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila?
2. In what ways do the selected novels depict the impact of oil extraction on indigenous communities and their environment in the Niger Delta of Nigeria?
3. How are different forms of indigenous resistance and defiance represented in the narratives in response to the power structures associated with oil politics?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The Niger Delta in Nigeria has become one of the most significant global examples of the complex relationship between natural resource extraction, political power, and environmental degradation. Since the discovery of commercial oil in 1956, petroleum production has played a central role in the Nigerian economy, contributing the majority of the country's export earnings and government revenue. However, the benefits of oil wealth have largely bypassed the indigenous communities of the Niger Delta, who continue to experience poverty, underdevelopment, and environmental devastation despite living in one of the most resource-rich regions in Africa (Elum, Mopipi, & Henri-Ukoha, 2016). Scholars argue that the concentration of oil resources in the region has generated intense political contestation involving the Nigerian state, multinational oil corporations, and local communities, creating a complex nexus of power, economic interests, and environmental consequences.

2.2. Environmental Degradation of Niger Delta

Environmental degradation remains one of the most critical consequences of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. Numerous studies highlight how oil spills, gas flaring, and pipeline leakages have caused widespread contamination of soil, water, and air across the region. Petroleum spillages, often resulting from equipment failure, pipeline corrosion, and sabotage, have severely damaged ecosystems and threatened the livelihoods of communities that depend on farming and fishing (Akpogheli, Ugbuku, & Esemefade, 2021). Research also indicates that large areas of agricultural land and mangrove forests have been destroyed due to hydrocarbon pollution, leading to the decline of biodiversity and food resources in the region (Ozondu & Egbunike, 2023). Scientific assessments further confirm that oil spills have contaminated groundwater, reduced soil fertility, and

degraded aquatic ecosystems, thereby intensifying ecological instability and economic hardship for local populations (Adebangbe, Dixon, & Barrett, 2025).

Beyond environmental damage, oil exploitation has also produced serious socio-economic and health consequences for indigenous communities. Studies reveal that pollution from petroleum activities has significantly affected land quality, food production systems, and access to clean water, which in turn has influenced public health and nutritional security in the region (Gbadamosi & Aldstadt, 2025). In many communities, the destruction of fishing grounds and agricultural lands has led to rising unemployment, economic marginalization, and increased social unrest. Scholars further note that oil pollution has been linked to respiratory illnesses, reproductive health problems, and psychological distress among local populations exposed to contaminated environments. These findings demonstrate that the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta extends beyond ecological damage and directly affects the social and economic stability of the communities inhabiting the region.

In addition to ecological and socio-economic consequences, the politics surrounding oil extraction has intensified conflicts between local communities, the Nigerian government, and multinational oil corporations. Many scholars argue that the unequal distribution of oil revenues and the failure of environmental regulations have contributed to widespread dissatisfaction and resistance movements within the region. The concentration of oil wealth in the hands of political elites and corporate actors has created a system where local populations bear the environmental costs of extraction while receiving limited economic benefits. As a result, the Niger Delta has witnessed numerous protests, militant activities, and community-led movements demanding environmental justice and equitable resource distribution. These political tensions highlight how petroleum functions not only as an economic resource but also as a powerful political instrument that shapes governance, social inequality, and resistance in oil-producing societies.

The concept of petropolitics provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between oil resources and political power. Petropolitics broadly refers to the ways in which petroleum resources influence governance structures, economic systems, and international relations. Scholars argue that oil is not merely an economic commodity but also a powerful political instrument that shapes state authority, global alliances, and social hierarchies. Early discussions of petropolitics emphasize how the control of oil reserves enables states and powerful actors to exercise significant political leverage both domestically and internationally. According to Michael T. Klare (2004), petroleum resources play a decisive role in shaping geopolitical strategies, as governments and corporations compete to control oil-producing regions. This competition

often leads to political instability, conflict, and unequal resource distribution, particularly in developing countries where governance institutions are fragile.

2.3. Socio-Economic Factors in Governance

Another significant perspective within petropolitical studies focuses on the relationship between oil wealth and governance systems. The “resource curse” theory suggests that countries rich in natural resources often experience weak institutional development, corruption, and authoritarian governance. Terry Lynn Karl (1997) argues that petroleum revenues frequently distort political and economic structures by concentrating wealth and decision-making power in the hands of state elites. In oil-dependent economies, governments often rely heavily on resource rents rather than taxation, reducing accountability to citizens and weakening democratic participation. These dynamics results in political systems state that authority is closely tied to the control and distribution of oil revenues. Similarly, scholars highlight that oil wealth can intensify social inequality and regional marginalization, particularly when local communities in oil-producing regions receive limited economic benefits, despite bearing the environmental costs of extraction.

Petropolitics also examines the complex relationship between multinational oil corporations and host states. The expansion of global oil industries has created transnational networks of economic and political influence that often shape national policies and local governance structures. According to Timothy Mitchell (2009), modern political systems are deeply intertwined with the global energy economy. Mitchell argues that the political power associated with oil is not only exercised through state institutions but is also embedded within corporate structures, technological systems, and global markets that regulate energy production and distribution. This perspective highlights how oil economies operate within broader capitalist networks, where multinational corporations, financial institutions, and political elites collaborate to maintain control over energy resources.

Furthermore, petropolitical scholarship has increasingly examined how oil economies generate social conflict and resistance in resource-rich regions. Communities living in oil-producing areas often face environmental degradation, displacement, and economic marginalization, which frequently lead to protests and resistance movements. Scholars argue that these conflicts are closely linked to the unequal distribution of oil wealth and the exclusion of local populations from decision-making processes related to resource management. In many cases, communities mobilize politically to challenge both state authorities and multinational corporations, demanding environmental justice and equitable access to resource benefits. These dynamics demonstrate how oil functions as a central force in shaping power relations, social struggles, and political transformations within resource-dependent societies.

In literary studies, the concept of petropolitics has gained increasing attention as scholars explore how literature represents the political and environmental consequences of oil extraction. Literary texts set in oil-producing regions often depict the tensions between corporate interests, state power, and indigenous communities affected by resource exploitation. By applying petropolitical frameworks, researchers are able to analyze how narratives reveal the hidden structures of power embedded within the global oil economy. Such approaches highlight the ways in which literature not only reflects environmental and political crises but also exposes the broader systems of power that sustain resource exploitation.

Environmental justice has emerged as a significant area of inquiry in African literary studies, particularly in relation to the ecological and socio-political consequences of resource extraction in oil-producing regions. Scholars have increasingly examined how African literature engages with issues of environmental degradation, economic exploitation, and the marginalization of indigenous communities. Environmental justice frameworks emphasize the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits, where marginalized populations often bear the ecological costs of industrial activities while receiving limited economic gains (Nixon, 2011). Within the African context, literary works frequently depict the lived experiences of communities affected by extractive industries, highlighting the environmental destruction and social inequalities generated by global capitalism. These narratives not only portray ecological devastation but also foreground the struggles of local populations seeking justice and recognition.

2.4. Slow Violence

One of the key contributions to the study of environmental injustice in literature is the concept of “slow violence” introduced by Rob Nixon (2011). Nixon argues that environmental destruction often unfolds gradually and invisibly, making it difficult to capture within conventional narratives of crisis or conflict. In many African contexts, the environmental damage caused by oil extraction, mining, and deforestation accumulates over long periods, gradually eroding ecosystems and livelihoods. African literary texts play a crucial role in making this slow violence visible by documenting the long-term environmental and social consequences of industrial activities. Through storytelling, authors illuminate the cumulative impact of pollution, land dispossession, and ecological disruption on vulnerable communities.

Another important dimension of African environmental literature involves the representation of indigenous resistance against ecological exploitation. Scholars note that African writers frequently portray communities mobilizing against environmental injustice through protests, activism, and collective struggle. According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010), postcolonial ecocriticism explores how literary texts challenge colonial and neo-colonial systems that exploit natural resources in formerly colonized

regions. Within this framework, environmental narratives often expose the power imbalances between multinational corporations, political elites, and indigenous populations whose lands are subjected to resource extraction. By highlighting these tensions, African literature becomes a platform for critiquing environmental injustice and advocating for more equitable relationships between humans, nature, and economic development.

2.5. Cultural Identity and Communal Survival

Furthermore, African literary texts frequently portray the cultural and spiritual relationships that indigenous communities maintain with their natural environments. These narratives emphasize that land, rivers, and forests are not merely economic resources but integral components of cultural identity and communal survival. Scholars argue that environmental degradation in Africa therefore represents not only ecological destruction but also the erosion of cultural traditions and social cohesion (Okuyade, 2013). Consequently, literary representations of environmental resistance often reflect broader struggles to preserve cultural heritage, community autonomy, and ecological sustainability.

In recent years, ecocritical studies have increasingly recognized the importance of African literature in documenting environmental crises and articulating alternative perspectives on development and resource management. Through narrative strategies that combine environmental awareness with social critique, African writers reveal the interconnectedness of ecological destruction, political power, and economic inequality. These literary works highlight how indigenous communities resist environmental exploitation while asserting their rights to land, resources, and environmental justice. As a result, African literature provides a valuable lens for understanding the broader political and ecological struggles associated with resource extraction in the contemporary global economy.

Although a substantial body of scholarship has examined environmental degradation, oil politics, and socio-economic marginalization in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, much of this research has primarily focused on environmental studies, political economy, and ecological justice rather than literary representations of these issues. Existing studies on environmental justice and African literature have explored themes such as ecological destruction, slow violence, and community resistance; however, these discussions often remain general and do not specifically analyze the political dynamics of oil within literary narratives. Likewise, research on petropolitics has largely concentrated on geopolitical strategies, resource governance, and the “resource curse,” with limited attention to how literary texts reflect and critique the political power structures embedded in oil economies. Although individual analyses of *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila address themes of environmental destruction and

social injustice, few studies have examined these works comparatively through the theoretical framework of petropolitics. Therefore, a gap remains in understanding how contemporary African fiction represents environmental exploitation and indigenous resistance within the broader dynamics of oil-driven political power. This study seeks to address this gap by applying a petropolitical perspective to analyze how the selected novels portray the relationship between petroleum extraction, political authority, and community resistance.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Petropolitics

Petropolitics, as articulated by Michael J. Watts, situates oil not merely as a valuable economic resource, but as a central force shaping political authority, social relations, and spatial governance in oil-producing regions. Watts's work extends beyond classical resource-based explanations like the "resource curse" and rentier state theories by integrating political ecology to explore how oil extraction produces distinct forms of power, inequality, and conflict (Watts, 2004). In his analysis of the Niger Delta, Watts shows that oil has reconfigured social, economic, and political landscapes, creating what he terms an "oil complex" an ensemble of transnational corporations, state structures, and local actors whose interactions govern resource flows, territorial control, and community identities (Watts, 2004). This framework challenges commodity determinism by emphasizing how power and governance emerge through institutional arrangements, geopolitical interests, and uneven social relations tied to petroleum extraction.

Watts's petropolitical perspective also foregrounds how oil-driven political economies shape governable spaces and modes of rule. In the Niger Delta, oil wealth has produced enclave economies and fragmented political authority, where local chieftaincies, ethnic identities, and national governance systems operate simultaneously but often incoherently (Watts, 2004). These overlapping "governable spaces" illustrate how oil politics disrupts existing social structures and fosters competing claims to authority, leading to instability, violence, and localized insurgencies. According to Watts, this fragmentation reflects how oil capitalism deploys governance not as a unified state project but as multiple, contradictory political projects that foster uneven power relations between elites, corporations, and indigenous communities.

A key contribution of Watts's framework is its attention to how oil produces socio-environmental conflict by linking extraction to political authority and social marginalization. In works such as *Petro-Violence* and *Violent Environment*, he demonstrates that petroleum extraction in the Niger Delta does not merely generate environmental harm but creates structures of violence economic, social, and political that are embedded in everyday life for local communities. This approach views conflict not as isolated or inevitable but as embedded in the political ecology of oil, where the struggle

over resource control, revenues, and governance becomes central to community-state-corporate relations (Watts, 1999; Watts, 2004b). By doing so, Watts reframes oil politics as a site where power, resistance, and governance intersect, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how indigenous communities navigate and contest petropolitical domination.

In relation to literary analysis, applying Watts's petropolitical framework enables interpretation of texts like *How Beautiful We Were* and *Oil on Water* as narratives that reflect the political ecology of oil where environmental exploitation, actors' power struggles, and resistance movements are not merely thematic elements but manifestations of deeper petropolitical structures. Literature thus becomes a means of critiquing how oil shapes identities, spatial governance, and socio-political conflicts, echoing Watts's assertion that oil is both a material and political force shaping societies in profound ways.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Petropolitical Power and Environmental Exploitation

The first research question examines **how petropolitical power shapes the representation of environmental exploitation and socio-economic marginalization** in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila. Applying Michael J. Watts's framework of petropolitics, oil is not merely an economic commodity in these narratives but a central mechanism of power that structures the social, political, and environmental realities of the Niger Delta. Both novels portray oil as a material and political force that generates environmental degradation while enabling corporations and state authorities to consolidate wealth and authority at the expense of indigenous communities (Watts, 2004). This dual role of oil as a source of capital and a tool of political domination frames much of the conflict and suffering depicted in the novels.

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue illustrates how a multinational oil company exploits the village of Kosawa, contaminating farmlands and water sources while maintaining close ties with the Nigerian government to avoid accountability. This relationship exemplifies Watts's concept of the "oil complex," where transnational corporations, political elites, and local intermediaries collaborate to control resource flows and political authority (Watts, 2004). The environmental exploitation in the novel is inseparable from the socio-political hierarchy it reinforces: villagers face marginalization, poverty, and the loss of livelihoods precisely because oil wealth is extracted and channeled to external actors. Similarly, Habila's *Oil on Water* portrays the Niger Delta as a space where oil extraction dictates social and political order. The contamination of rivers, loss of fisheries, and destruction of farmland are framed within broader political and corporate interests, illustrating how environmental harm is intertwined with governance and power structures (Watts, 1999).

Without their warning, how would I have known that rivers were not ordinarily covered with oil and toxic waste? Without our parents' stories about their childhoods in a clean Kosawa, their days spent swimming in rivers that ran clear, how would my friends and I have known that the sporadic smokiness that enveloped the village and left our eyes watery and noses runny was not an ordinary occurrence in the lives of other children our age? (Mbue, 2022, p.34)

The use of the terms oil and toxic waste indicates aesthetic and ecological threats to the ecosystem and society. This changes material conditions, undermining the traditional practices. A degradation of environmental heritage, represented by parents remembering clean Kosawa as a loss of cultural heritage, brings out Petro-Politics as a threat to the environment and, by extension, a threat to the culture. Allusions to health risks and contaminated air highlight the dangers of the petro-industry, associating the consequences of environmental disturbances with the health of a specific community. When Petro-Politics rules, nature cry, says Safaeyan (2022), the material wealth of Africa is sucked away, leaving traces in the soil and a broken heart among people (Safaeyan, 2022). "The noise from the oil field multiplied; day and night we heard it in our bedrooms, in our classroom, in the forest. Our air turned heavy (Mbue, 2022, p.39)."

Mbue's description of the sound of oil fields multiplying, intruding, and disturbing bedrooms and classrooms by day and night represents the disruptive presence of the Petro-Politics. This particular kind of noise shows how much oil is being extracted, how oil extraction is changing people's lives. The heavy noise is therefore an indication of the noise and air pollution we are exposed to. In addition, this heavy noise pollution is indicative of the heavy air pollution and its possible detrimental effects on our health. The air pollution and noise pollution are indicative of how much harm Petro-Politics is doing to us and how much harm Petro-Politics is doing to our community.

It's the oil and the fighting. It affects everyone in a strange way. I'm going to write a book on that someday. I've been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place, a place for dying (Habla, 2011, p.124).

This relates to the general sense of insecurity brought by oil and oil-related conflicts and the psychological disturbances and emotional suffering it causes. It suggests that Petro-Politics occurs also within the environment and harms it. Yet, also it extends to the geographical outcome and impacts the adaptive capacity of a population and the coping mechanisms. The appropriation of the site as a dead, dying place is a metaphor. Such an expression goes beyond the environmental literalness to a more chilling desolation and hopelessness. Such visualization, so to speak, leads one to think that Petro-Politics has rendered the place barren as far as the environment goes, and as far as the place is concerned, human habitation is of a wider, more vivid, positive context. The desolation

brought by Petro-Politics is not to be taken lightly and essentially revolves around life in the given locale.

Maybe fate wanted to show her firsthand the carcasses of the fish and crabs and waterbirds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce (Habila, 2011, p.156).

This phrase captures the immediacy and physical threat of Petro-Politics and the material conditions of the environment. The imagery of dead marine life on the beaches captures the profound ecological devastation embedded in oil production. Such devastation is also the loss of natural balance in the marine ecosystem. These dead bodies on the beaches symbolize the relentless onslaught of Petro-Politics on the natural world. The dead marine life also correlates the Petro-Politics of oil production to the economic conditions of dependent coastal communities who engage in fishing. The loss of their fishing income also humanizes the onshore oil production, placing the collective threat Petro-Politics poses on the community. This also reflects the everyday material burdens Petro-Politics places on the coastal communities and natural ecosystems.

Both texts also demonstrate the concept of **enclave governance**, another aspect of petropolitics highlighted by Watts (2004b). In this system, oil-rich areas are physically and politically segregated: corporate and governmental authorities operate with autonomy, creating zones of wealth and security while local populations suffer the consequences of ecological damage and exclusion. This form of spatialized power highlights the uneven distribution of both environmental benefits and burdens, reinforcing social hierarchies and systemic inequalities. Moreover, the novels reveal that environmental exploitation is not incidental but a deliberate outcome of these power structures; oil extraction perpetuates both ecological degradation and socio-economic marginalization, reflecting Watts's assertion that petroleum functions as a vehicle of political control.

Ultimately, analyzing the novels through a petropolitical lens underscores the inseparability of oil, power, and environmental harm. The narratives show that environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is not merely a byproduct of industrial activity but a consequence of orchestrated political and economic power. By highlighting how oil consolidates authority and marginalizes indigenous communities, Mbue and Habila offer literary reflections of Watts's theory, demonstrating the real-world implications of petropolitics and the structural mechanisms through which environmental exploitation is sustained.

4.2. Impact of Oil Extraction on Indigenous Communities

The second research question explores **how different forms of indigenous resistance and defiance are represented in response to the power structures associated with oil politics** in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water*

by Helon Habila. Both novels depict the Niger Delta communities' struggles against the environmental, social, and political domination imposed by multinational oil corporations and complicit state authorities, reflecting the key tenets of Michael J. Watts's petropolitical framework. Watts (1999) emphasizes that oil operates not only as an economic resource but also as a mechanism of political control that shapes governance, social hierarchies, and spatial organization. Resistance in the novels emerges as both a **response to environmental degradation** and a challenge to systemic inequality, demonstrating that local communities are active agents rather than passive victims in oil-driven political and ecological systems.

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue portrays a spectrum of resistance, ranging from **individual acts of defiance** to **organized community mobilization**. Some villagers initially attempt personal strategies to mitigate the effects of oil spills, such as fishing despite contaminated waters or cultivating degraded land, reflecting the immediate struggle for survival. As environmental and socio-economic pressures intensify, collective resistance emerges through organized protests, sabotage of oil infrastructure, and appeals to global audiences to draw attention to corporate exploitation. These acts illustrate Watts's concept of "**petro-resistance**", where communities contest both the physical and political control exercised by oil elites (Watts, 1999). Mbue emphasizes that resistance is not solely confrontational but also deeply tied to cultural identity, community solidarity, and the ethical imperative to defend ancestral lands, highlighting the interconnection between ecological stewardship and social justice.

Weeks later, a new spill turned into a fire that ravaged the farms of six families, forcing mothers to go searching for new land deep in the forest, a trek that left many with little strength for toiling (Mbue, 2022, p.39).

Direct economic impact on the community could be illustrated by the story of a pipeline rupture that flooded a farm with oil. Imbolo Mbue highlights that petro-politics, in its oil-spill form, disrupts other economic activities, such as agriculture and livelihoods, by affecting harvests. The financial effect is evident, as food and money are issues, and the narrator, who has brought food to recess, is telling you about the immediate miseries of the directly affected people. It is the spills and subsequent fires, as stated in the passage that lead to substantial environmental degradation. This extraction of oil leads to petro-politics that, in effect, causes oil spills, which besides damaging farmland, pose a threat to the general environment. The fires add another layer to the destruction of nature and the ecosystem around it, impacting the local population and forcing people to seek new land, another burden on natural resources. The resulting spill leads to a fire that kills several farm animals, causing forced displacement.

Habila's *Oil on Water* similarly depicts forms of resistance that are both **pragmatic and symbolic**. Characters navigate a landscape dominated by oil extraction by engaging

in covert documentation of environmental crimes, exposing corporate malpractices, and attempting to assert local claims over land and resources. The novel foregrounds the **complexity and risks of resistance**, showing that actions against oil companies often provoke violent retaliation, socio-political suppression, or legal obstacles. This mirrors Watts's argument that oil governance structures are designed to maintain elite control, making resistance inherently challenging yet essential for marginalized communities (Watts, 2004b). Habila also highlights the role of storytelling, journalism, and intergenerational knowledge as tools of resistance, demonstrating that narrative and cultural memory are forms of defiance against both ecological destruction and political marginalization.

The same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return (Habila, 2011, p.16).

The image Habila creates in the quote depicts the extent to which petro-politics shapes the destiny of ordinary people in the Niger Delta. The frequent occurrence of oil spills and environmental degradation is a symptom of an underlying issue that affects the livelihoods of the communities hosting them. The feeling of a degrading living standard sets in when the authors talk of abandoned houses and a distinct smell of decay, and the feelings mix on the verge of an inexplicable sadness that covers the town. The ghostly community's metaphorical expressions offer a face of spectral displacement and powerlessness, the aggregate of all the community's endeavors to endure in the milieu of oil mining spillovers. The continued existence of the issues described in the quote can be characterized as a long-running effort to determine the community's future in such significant, multifaceted ways.

Both novels underscore that resistance in the Niger Delta is **multi-layered**, encompassing personal, communal, and cultural dimensions. These narratives depict resistance not as a singular heroic act but as a sustained, collective effort shaped by social relationships, environmental realities, and political constraints. By foregrounding these struggles, the authors illuminate the ways in which indigenous communities contest the socio-political hierarchies embedded in petropolitical systems. The novels also reveal that resistance is intimately linked to ecological stewardship, cultural preservation, and social justice, suggesting that environmental and political activism are inseparable in oil-rich regions.

Applying Watts's petropolitical lens to these texts reveals that resistance in the Niger Delta emerges as a **response to structural inequalities and environmental predation**. Mbue and Habila depict indigenous defiance as both strategic and symbolic, demonstrating the agency, resilience, and ethical commitment of communities confronting

the intertwined power of state and corporate actors. The novels highlight the political, social, and ecological stakes of oil extraction, positioning resistance as a critical mode of contesting domination and asserting rights within oil-driven political economies.

4.3. Indigenous Resistance and Defiance

The third research question investigates **how the selected novels depict the impact of oil extraction on indigenous communities and their environment in the Niger Delta**. Both *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila present vivid portrayals of the socio-environmental consequences of petroleum exploitation, reflecting the lived realities of communities subjected to oil-driven economic and political structures. These narratives emphasize that oil extraction is not an isolated industrial activity but a process deeply embedded in local ecology, culture, and social organization, producing far-reaching consequences for the health, livelihoods, and social cohesion of affected populations (Watts, 2004b; Watts, 1999).

In Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, the villagers of Kosawa experience **devastating environmental degradation** as oil spills contaminate rivers, destroy farmland, and compromise fishing grounds. This ecological damage directly threatens the community's subsistence-based livelihoods, illustrating how resource extraction disrupts traditional ways of life. The novel also highlights the **socio-economic marginalization** of the community: oil revenues bypass the villagers, enriching corporations and political elites while the locals suffer poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity. Mbue presents this disparity as a structural outcome of the political and economic systems surrounding oil, reflecting Watts's observation that oil functions as a medium of power that reshapes social hierarchies and governance structures in oil-producing regions (Watts, 2004). The novel portrays not just physical contamination but also the **erosion of social cohesion**, as internal tensions emerge within the community over strategies of resistance and adaptation to these external pressures.

On the same day the story became public, the Restoration Movement people called the Pexton office and asked them for the truth: Did Pexton know what its oil exploration was doing to the village of Kosawa? Was Pexton doing anything to help the villagers affected by their spills and toxic wastes? (Mbue, 2022, p.166)

The quote by Imbolo Mbue, author of the book *How Beautiful We Were*, explains why ordinary people living in the Niger Delta are so opposed to the policies of foreign oil-extracting firms. It dwells on what the Restoration Movement did to probe Pexton, the oil company responsible for the environmental blowout in Kosawa. The novel is one form of resistance that raises awareness of the impact of oil processes. The enquiry at Pexton reveals an attempt to establish accountability, as the society seeks to be informed of whether the company knew of the problem and what it did to mitigate its impact on

villagers. Such active action means community empowerment and the Restoration Movement demands its role when it is used against them. The interrogatives are more than seeking information; they challenge Pexton's receptivity and the will to do what he can to lessen the impact on the community, and are more of an objection to perceived wrongs. The text even refers to legal and social implications, suggesting that legal action or civil movements may be initiated if the corporation fails to respond to problems detected in the increase process.

Similarly, Habila's *Oil on Water* depicts the Niger Delta as a landscape marked by **environmental fragility and human vulnerability**. The destruction of fisheries, pollution of drinking water, and degradation of farmland serve as constant reminders of the risks posed by oil extraction. The novel also foregrounds the **human cost of ecological harm**, illustrating how communities experience displacement, loss of cultural heritage, and exposure to health hazards due to environmental contamination. Habila emphasizes the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems, showing that the environmental degradation caused by petroleum extraction intensifies socio-political tensions and deepens economic inequities. These portrayals reflect Watts's argument that oil extraction produces both environmental and social "violence," where the structural mechanisms of power embedded in petroleum economies directly impact local populations (Watts, 1999).

Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence every day. Tell them how we are hounded daily in our own land. Where do they want us to go, tell me, where? (Habila, 2011, p.187)

Helon Habila discusses how novels facilitated the involvement of ordinary people in the Niger Delta in the popular resistance against the policies of the international oil-extracting institutions. Even in this context, the requirement to tell the truth solely highlights the disgust at manipulating and distorting the story. Water and soil pollution process, military pressure, and daily harassment are the stories of the community opposing the destructive impact of outside authorities. Another factor that contributes to highlighting the suffering of the Niger Delta people by drawing attention to the problem of displacement is the heartbreaking issue of displacement. That text summarizes the multidimensionality of resistance, just as citizens experience environmental, social, and existential paradoxes in resisting the action of global oil-harvesting businesses.

Furthermore, both novels illustrate the **gendered and generational dimensions** of environmental and social impacts. Women, who are primarily responsible for food preparation, water collection, and family care, bear a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation. Children and future generations face uncertainty due to the loss of arable land and clean water, underscoring the intergenerational consequences of oil exploitation. By showing how environmental degradation intersects with social, economic,

and cultural factors, the novels offer a holistic representation of the **multi-dimensional impact of oil extraction on indigenous communities**. Analyzing these texts through a petropolitical lens reveals that environmental exploitation in the Niger Delta is inseparable from the socio-economic marginalization of indigenous populations. The novels depict how oil extraction transforms ecological systems, livelihoods, and social structures, illustrating the material and political dimensions of oil. By foregrounding the experiences of affected communities, Mbue and Habila not only document environmental harm but also critique the broader political and corporate mechanisms that perpetuate inequality and ecological devastation.

The analysis of *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila through the lens of Michael J. Watts's petropolitical framework reveals a complex interplay between oil, political authority, environmental degradation, and indigenous resistance. The findings underscore that oil in the Niger Delta functions as a **material and political force** that shapes social hierarchies, spatial governance, and ecological realities. Both novels consistently portray the region as a space where multinational corporations, government authorities, and local intermediaries collaborate to maintain control over petroleum resources, often at the expense of indigenous communities. This aligns with Watts's notion of the "oil complex," demonstrating that environmental exploitation and socio-economic marginalization are deliberately structured outcomes of oil-driven governance (Watts, 2004).

One major finding is the **environmental consequences of oil extraction**, which include widespread contamination of rivers, destruction of farmland, loss of fisheries, and degradation of mangrove ecosystems. In Mbue's novel, the village of Kosawa experiences direct ecological harm, including water pollution and soil contamination, which threatens subsistence farming and fishing livelihoods. Habila's narrative similarly depicts environmental destruction as pervasive, affecting the daily survival and health of local populations. These findings reinforce that oil extraction produces "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011), where environmental harm accumulates over time, leading to long-term socio-economic consequences. The novels illustrate that ecological degradation is not merely incidental but intrinsically tied to political and corporate power structures, highlighting the inseparability of ecological and political violence.

Another key finding is the **socio-economic marginalization** of indigenous communities. Both texts depict how oil wealth is siphoned away by corporations and political elites, leaving local populations impoverished despite living in resource-rich territories. In Kosawa, villagers face unemployment, loss of land, and inadequate infrastructure, reflecting Watts's observation that oil economies create **enclave governance and uneven development** (Watts, 2004). Habila emphasizes similar patterns of inequality, showing how environmental degradation and corporate exploitation

exacerbate social vulnerability, disrupt livelihoods, and intensify community tensions. These narratives collectively illustrate that petroleum extraction is a vehicle for consolidating power and wealth while disenfranchising local populations, echoing broader discussions of the “resource curse” in political ecology and development studies.

The novels also demonstrate **multi-layered indigenous resistance**, which emerges as a response to both environmental exploitation and socio-political marginalization. In Mbue’s work, resistance ranges from personal defiance to collective mobilization, including protests, sabotage of oil infrastructure, and appeals to international audiences. Habila portrays similar acts, highlighting both overt and covert strategies such as documenting environmental crimes, leveraging journalism, and sustaining cultural memory as a form of defiance. These narratives confirm Watts’s assertion that oil extraction produces structural violence, but also that communities exercise agency, resilience, and ethical stewardship in resisting domination (Watts, 1999; Watts, 2004b). Importantly, resistance is portrayed not just as a reaction to ecological harm but as a broader struggle for social justice, cultural preservation, and political recognition, emphasizing the ethical and socio-political dimensions of indigenous activism.

Finally, the novels reveal **the interconnection of environmental, social, and political systems**, illustrating that ecological degradation, marginalization, and resistance are inseparable components of the Niger Delta’s petropolitical landscape. Environmental harm amplifies socio-economic vulnerability, which in turn triggers collective action and resistance, creating a cyclical dynamic between exploitation and contestation. Both authors foreground the ethical, cultural, and intergenerational implications of oil politics, showing that the struggle over petroleum resources is not only economic or political but also deeply social and ecological.

The findings of this study demonstrate that oil functions as a **central organizing force in the Niger Delta**, shaping environmental conditions, social hierarchies, and political authority. By analyzing Mbue and Habila through a petropolitical lens, this research reveals the structural mechanisms through which oil-driven governance produces ecological and social harm, while also highlighting the agency, resilience, and resistance of indigenous communities. These findings contribute to both literary and socio-political scholarship by connecting narrative representation to real-world dynamics of oil, power, and environmental justice.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the intersection of oil politics, environmental degradation, and indigenous resistance in the Niger Delta through a petropolitical lens, focusing on *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila. The findings demonstrate that oil functions as both a material and political force that reshapes ecological systems, social hierarchies, and governance structures. Environmental exploitation is

depicted not as incidental but as a deliberate outcome of the entangled interests of multinational corporations and state authorities, reflecting Watts's concept of the "oil complex." Both novels portray the socio-economic marginalization of indigenous communities, highlighting how oil wealth is extracted from local territories without equitable distribution, thereby exacerbating poverty, social inequality, and cultural disruption. Furthermore, the narratives illustrate the cumulative, intergenerational consequences of environmental degradation, emphasizing that oil extraction produces a form of structural "slow violence" that undermines the livelihoods, health, and well-being of vulnerable populations (Nixon, 2011; Watts, 2004b).

At the same time, the novels foreground the resilience, agency, and resistance of affected communities. Indigenous resistance ranges from personal acts of defiance to organized collective action, including protests, sabotage, and the use of cultural memory and storytelling to contest corporate and state domination. These responses demonstrate that affected communities are active participants in challenging environmental injustice and political marginalization. By applying Watts's petropolitical framework, this study shows that literature serves as a critical site for understanding how oil shapes both oppression and resistance, revealing the interdependence of ecological, socio-economic, and political dynamics. The research contributes to scholarly discourse on African literature, environmental justice, and political ecology by illustrating how narratives reflect and critique the structural mechanisms of oil-driven power while highlighting the ethical and cultural imperatives of indigenous activism.

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