



# Water, Water, Everywhere: Water in Green Literatures - with special reference to *The Year of the Flood* and *Oil on Water*

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**Abstract:** The paper proposes to study how water has been depicted in Green Literatures, especially with reference to Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, analyzing whether it has been used merely as an aspect of imagery or is an important narrative tool. Green Literature is a term used for literatures that have underlying ecological themes and narratives; these works are considered part of Ecocriticism, a field of discourse that applies ecological concepts to literature.

*The Year of the Flood* is a Science Fiction set in a world where corporate-led human advancement is primary, and the world of nature is just a resource to be exhausted for such advancement. This path of advancement leads to the outbreak of a 'waterless flood' which results in an apocalypse which threatens the existence of entire humanity in the novel. This flood narrative in the novel has roots in age-old western mythos like the Bible, and it points to a continuing tradition of didacticism from the mythos to Sci-Fi through the idea of water (flood). *Oil on Water* is a Petrofiction which describes the effect of Big Oil on the Niger River Delta. This novel shows the effects of operations of Western Neocolonial Corporations (in Neocolonised countries) not only on the local people there, but also the local ecology as well, especially water. Water in this novel is not only an indicator of ecological health, but is also a medium of subversion of anthropocentrism, which in Ecocriticism, is a major cause of our unjust treatment of ecology.

In both these works, water is not merely an entity of nature, but an important part of the ecological narrative of the novel. These are the motives that led me to look at the two novels for their depiction of water.

**IndexTerms** - Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Petrofiction.

In the village center we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent...  
but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face

- Helon Habila, *Oil on Water*

## INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism, which is the application of ecological concepts to literature, constitutes, among other things, works of literature which have an ecological agenda. The function of such works of literature is to advocate for an ecologically healthy planet. In Science Fictions, it is common for novels to portray a future where unbridled human activities have led to an apocalypse, thus hinting that the current path of technological and civilizational advancement is not in the right direction. Such activities may be described as stemming from anthropocentrism, the philosophy/idea that human is at the center of existence and all the existence of rest of other entities of nature is relevant only in their capacity to support our existence. For advancement of human civilization, humans exploit and exhaust natural habitats and habitants with no empathy or restraint. This leads to great ecological destruction and disruption, and going by the argument of Rueckert in his seminal essay, by destroying the ecology we are harming not nature but ourselves, for nature is our sole habitat whose health is important for our existence.

Green literatures therefore are often laced with moralizing and didacticisms on mending our relationship with ecology for a sustainable living. Two kinds of Green Literature are under the lens in this paper: The first kind is Science Fiction; Science Fictions are speculative works of literature whose time or science is that of the future – these literatures generally portray a future with a negative outcome of man's actions. Science Fictions which have heavy ecological undertones are also referred to as Cli-Fi, a derivation of the term Sci-Fi which stands for science fiction. Cli-Fi thus are speculative fictions which warn us about the ecologically harmful path that we are in. *The Year of the Flood* is one such Sci-Fi/Cli-Fi, and it portrays an apocalyptic future where a "waterless flood" has erased almost all humanity; the novel follows an age-old framework of didacticism through a flood story. The second kind is the Petrofiction, a genre of literature which deals with the impact of Big Oil on societies and ecologies. *Oil on*

*Water* is a Petrofiction which uses literary realism to portrays the effect of Western oil corporations on the ecology of the Niger River Delta. These descriptions are aimed at bringing into light the harmful effects of oil operations around the globe, and this novel contains vivid description of the state of water bodies in the oil-laced Niger Delta. Water in this novel is not only an indicator of the ecological health of the region, but through the portrayal of the Ecovillage called The Shrine, it works as an agent of subversion of Anthropocentrism.

### THE WATERLESS FLOOD

*The Year of the Flood* is a Cli-Fi novel set in a future where an apocalypse has killed most of the human population. As the title suggests, this apocalypse is caused by a flood; the flood, however, is not caused by water - it has been referred to as the 'waterless flood'. The dystopian world in the novel is flooded by a viral plague, but this narrative will have the same effect on the readers as it had had in the floods caused by water in our myths. The narrative of flood has long existed in western myths like that of the story of Noah in the book of Genesis in the Bible or the flood story in the epic of Gilgamesh. The story of Noah in the Bible shows how God was angry at the humans for their digression from the path of righteousness, the right path shown by God. The world had become full of sin, and God in reaction to this sin makes it rain for several days until the whole world is flooded. This story of Noah gives a vital moral lesson to man to always be righteous in action and not commit sin. In *The Year of the Flood*, the same narrative framework has been used to put forth another moral lesson – the moral lesson of refraining from committing the ecological sin, lest there be flood as punishment, albeit the flood in the novel is a waterless one. The waterless flood in the novel is reminiscent of the flood in the Bible, for both are result of man's wrongdoings and in both cases the flood has the potential to wipe off all of humanity. Water in Noah's story in the Bible is a medium of punishment for wrongful living; water thus is a tool by which humans are punished for their sinful ways. Science fictions often offer narratives of a fair warning of an apocalyptic future of man does not heed the path he is taking. This is where science fiction and myths like the story of Noah in Genesis of the Bible are similar: they offer didactic elements with the something apocalyptic such as flood as punishment for taking the wrong path. In *The Year of the Flood*, the flood is a waterless one. This waterless flood is similar to the Biblical story of the Plague of Egypt in the Book of Exodus, where God brings upon floods – of diseases, locusts, plagues and so on as warning and punishment to the Egyptian Pharaoh and his people. In one of my previous papers, I have elucidated how Science Fiction is also a modern-day morality play, a didactic narrative of the Christian vein.

In *The Year of the Flood*, the waterless flood is a direct result of the sinful anthropocentric advancements of the dystopian society. The flood of plague is unleashed unto the earth because of a biochemical accident by the corporation CorpSeCorps which was a leading anthropocentric institution of the society in the novel. This flood wipes off almost all people of the planet; however, there is a group God's Gardeners in the novel who do not contract the plague. This group is a religious Eco Cultural group who are not in the sinful anthropocentric ways of man. They have managed to live a sustainable ecocentric way of life which is righteous and free from ecological sin. Therefore, the God's Gardeners, just like Noah, are spared the punishment of the flood. The main characters of the novel, Toby and Ren, are members of the God's Gardeners and successfully navigate the apocalyptic environment till the end the novel.

Apparently, there is no water in *The Year of the Flood*, but it is there as a symbol, it is there as an idea of a flood. In this novel the water is carried into our consciousness through our memories of the floods in the myths which has been a part of the human culture and civilization since time immemorial. Our civilizational tales have told us of the coming of a flood (of water) whenever our paths go astray; in *The Year of the Flood*, the flood comes again, a flood of plague which has the destructive potential of the flood waters, when humanity has gone astray in its path towards unbridled anthropocentrism.

### NOR ANY DROP TO DRINK

*Oil on Water* is a Petrofiction which details the presence of Western oil corporations in the Niger River Delta and its effects on the local people and ecology of the region. Habila has, in the novel, depicted how the locals have been affected by the corporations. Most of them are up for quick money and have taken up jobs and activities associated with the corporations, but have been later disillusioned – money has come, but it has lowered their quality of life, the society is not fit for living anymore. There have been rebel factions which have come up as a resistance to the influx of these western corporations. There is also the military to protect the corporation from these rebels; the military are, apparently, there for protecting the civilians as well from these rebel militants. The military, however, fares poorly in telling the commons from the rebels; similarly, the rebels are sceptic of the common civilians as informers of the army. Between the army and the rebel militants, the common people are the ones who suffer the most, they struggle to negotiate and survive from the prying eyes and accusing fingers of both the military and the rebels. There is thus a continuing ongoing violence and ransacking which has, as collateral, destroyed village ecosystems across the region in crossfires and weaponised cleanups of settlements. The oil corporations, as depicted by Habila, have adversely affected not only the human population of the region but it has also disrupted the non-human entities and ecology of the region. The land and water in the region are no longer habitable to any plants or animals, even the humans get nothing from the lands (and water) anymore. Briefly after the novel opens, the main characters Rufus and Zaq navigate through the ransacked villages ploughed through by the military and the rebels, and their description of the land and water is an indicator of the ecological health of the river delta. Rufus describes the waters of the river as toxic and sulphurous, unresponsive of life. Rufus can see dead birds scattered all over with black slick oil covering their dead bodies and outstretched wing as they navigate the rivers moving from village to village; dead fishes float on the eaters of the river. The water no longer provides the people with fish, this is when the people realise that they have destroyed their ecology in favour of oil corporations. They can see how by undoing their environment they have undone themselves. The water, thus, becomes a primary indicator of the ecological health of the Niger River Delta.

In the novel, water is not only an indicator of ecological health, but it is also a tool of subverting anthropocentrism. In the novel there is an ecovillage on an island which is called The Shrine. The Shrine is home to people whose ways of life are quite different from that of the general population. This community of people do not indulge and associate with oil corporations, and they have pedestals nature. They worship the sun and the moon and the sea. They have religious and spiritual ceremonies where they

express their ecocentric philosophies. In one of the scenes, Rufus notices the worshippers go to the sea and immerse themselves in water, worshipping the sea; he is then told by a resident here that the worshippers are performing this ceremony as they believe in the healing powers of the sea. They also go through a ceremony which takes place on the beach facing the sea; here Rufus comes to know that the head priestess is preparing for her death. The people here consider themselves a part of nature; nature dictates that death is to come to all, and the worshippers of The Shrine do not try to overcome it. The head priestess leads by example, having declared her death a week ago and performing ceremonies for its welcoming. These ideologies are an explicit contrast of the general anthropocentric philosophies and ways of life where man has become the most powerful entity of nature, even above nature and is trying to beat death through scientific advancements. The water ceremonies of the worshippers of The Shrine bring down humans to their rightful place – among other entities of nature, and at par with them!

## CONCLUSION

Water in *The Year of the Flood* and *Oil on Water* has strong implications of Ecocriticism. It is a signifier of the current ecological health of the planet; in *Oil on Water*, it warns us as to what we have done to the planet and how it is going to come back at us where it becomes inhabitable. In this novel water is also a tool where anthropocentrism is subverted, water is considered as all powerful and even humans the most dominating beings on planet must bow down to it just like the worshippers of The Shrine do. Water also acts as a medium of instruction for us. Since ancient times flood narratives have acted as mediums of instructions through our myths and religious texts; in current times these narratives have taken the medium of Sci-Fi for a renewed purpose of ecological instructions. We are, today, committing grave ecological sins, and in Green Literatures such as sci-fi flood narratives warn us of our anthropocentrism.

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