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Androtexts and the Materialisation of Women's Bodies in Helon Habila's Fiction

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of women's bodies in Helon Habila's four novels – *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, *Oil on Water*, and *Travellers* – with attention to how female corporeality is constructed, mediated, and politicised within male-authored African fiction. Employing feminist textual analysis grounded in African feminist theories and feminist new materialism, the paper interrogates the dual operations of androtextuality and materialisation. It examines how Habila's narrative strategies inscribe women's bodies as sites where histories of political repression, ecological devastation, and migratory precarity are written. The analysis reveals that although Habila's fiction often reproduces androtextual mediation through male narrators, it simultaneously destabilises patriarchal representation by emphasising the irreducible materiality and resistant agency of female characters. Women's bodies emerge not only as symbolic constructs of national and ecological trauma but also as tangible, suffering entities that bear witness to structural violence while asserting endurance and agency. The study concludes that Habila's oeuvre embodies a productive ambivalence: it both participates in and critiques patriarchal narrative frameworks, thereby contributing to contemporary feminist and postcolonial discourses on gender, embodiment, and power in African literature.

Key words: Androtext; Feminist materialism; Women's bodies; African feminism; Helon Habila

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INTRODUCTION

The politics of representation in African literature has often centred on the question of gender, that is, how women are written, read, and embodied in male-authored fiction. In the trajectory of Nigerian prose fiction, from Chinua Achebe to contemporary writers, critics have laid bare a recurring androcentric gaze that circumscribes women's roles within patriarchal paradigms (Amadiume, 1997; Stratton, 1994; Azuike, 2003). Helon Habila, one of Nigeria's foremost contemporary novelists, situates his fiction within this continuum while also offering complex portrayals that invite feminist critique. Across his four novels, Habila returns to women's bodies as symbolic and material sites of narration, often embedding them in contexts of dictatorship, violence, ecological devastation, and migration.

This paper is based on two interrelated concerns. First, how do Habila's novels function as androtexts – texts that favour patriarchal modes of seeing and speaking about women? Second, how do these novels "materialise" women's bodies, not merely as metaphors, but as fleshed-out subjects shaped by history, politics, and trauma? These concerns are urgent because they address the dual challenge of appraising male-authored African fiction critically while also recuperating the agency of women characters within the narratives.

The argument advanced here is that Habila's fiction is marked by an ambivalent dynamic. On the one hand, it risks reinscribing patriarchal tropes of women as victims, mothers, or objects of male desire. On the other, it foregrounds corporeal suffering in ways that expose the structural violence of patriarchy, state power, and global capitalism. The women in *Waiting for an Angel*,

Measuring Time, *Oil on Water*, and *Travellers* are not marginal footnotes but central to how Habila imagines the body politic. Their stories, often filtered through male narrators, complicate questions of voice, representation, and embodiment in the postcolonial canon.

By situating Habila's fiction within feminist theoretical frameworks, this study aims not only to critique its androtextuality but also to highlight its contribution to contemporary debates on gender, corporeality, and African literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Elaine Showalter's (1985) framework of *androtexts* and *gynotexts* provides a starting point for this study. *Androtexts* are texts produced within male-dominated traditions, often reproducing patriarchal ideologies, while *gynotexts* foreground women's writing, subjectivities, and embodied experiences. Although Showalter's conception emerged from Euro-American feminist literary theory, its application to African literature has been widely explored (Stratton, 1994; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). In the Nigerian context, critics like Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) and Azuike (2003) have argued that male-authored texts often use women as allegories for nationhood while silencing their agency. Reading Habila's novels as androtexts shows how women's bodies are scripted by male narrative authority, even as these bodies disrupt and exceed such scripting.

African feminist frameworks such as Stiwanism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994), nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2005), and Motherism (Acholonu, 1995) offer critical tools for engaging with Habila's representation of women. These frameworks emphasise context-specific analysis of gender, attending to the intersections of patriarchy, colonialism, and African cultural dynamics. Adebayo (2018) notes that Nigerian women in fiction are often burdened with symbolic roles – as mothers of the nation, victims of war, or repositories of morality. Habila's novels resonate with these patterns but also reveal the violence underlying such significations.

In addition, the notion of the materialisation of women's bodies draws from feminist new materialism, particularly Barad's (2007) theory of "intra-action," Grosz's (1994) work on the corporeal body, and Ahmed's (2017) critique of how power is inscribed on flesh. In Habila's fiction, women's bodies are not abstract metaphors but tangible, violated, and resistant entities. Whether it is the kidnapped European woman in *Oil on Water*, the migrant women in *Travellers*, or the imprisoned Zara in *Waiting for an Angel*, the corporeal details pinpoint the embodied dimensions of oppression.

Lastly**,** scholars of African trauma literature (Bystrom & Slaughter, 2019; Nnodim, 2020) have drawn attention to how political violence is registered through bodily suffering. The female body, in particular, becomes a palimpsest of trauma – scarred by war, exploitation, and migration. Habila's women embody this dynamic, bearing the marks of dictatorship, ecological destruction, and displacement.

HABILA'S PLACE IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE

Since the publication of *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), Habila has been praised as one of the significant voices of the "third generation" of Nigerian writers (Adesanmi & Dunton, 2005). His fiction blends political engagement with narrative experimentation, often centered on ordinary individuals caught in larger socio-political crises. Critics have noted his preoccupation with state violence, corruption, and the struggles of intellectuals (Bryce, 2008; Okuyade, 2011). However, less attention has been given to his representations of women's bodies, which this study foregrounds.

Scholarly works on *Waiting for an Angel* often highlight its political critique of dictatorship (Harrow, 2005; Okuyade, 2009). Zara, Maria, and Alice are significant female characters, but critics have debated whether they are fleshed-out subjects or mere extensions of the male protagonist Lomba's struggles. Ogaga Okuyade (2009, p.53) argues that Zara's imprisonment exposes the "gendered costs of dictatorship," but also notes that her voice is mediated through Lomba's narration.

Measuring Time, however, has attracted scholarship for its engagement with history and memory (Diala, 2010; Olaniyan, 2014). The novel foregrounds twin brothers Mamo and LaMamo but also features women like Tabita and Habila's unnamed wives, whose lives embody both resilience and silencing. Diala (2010) points out that women in the novel serve as keepers of cultural continuity, yet their material struggles are overshadowed by the male-centered historiography.

As for Oil on Water, an eco-thriller, there has been a robust scholarly attention on the novel in relation to the Niger Delta crisis (Hron, 2012; Adesokan, 2014; Nixon, 2011; Olatunji, 2018). Critics have drawn attention to the kidnapped white woman, Isabel Floode, and the gendered violence in the novel's depiction of local women. Omelsky (2017) argues that women's violated bodies function as allegories for the ravaged environment, though such allegorical readings risk effacing women's subjectivity.

In Travellers (2019) Habila extends his thematic preoccupations to transnational migration. Reviews and scholarship (Adesokan, 2020; Chielozona, 2021; Saint, 2022) note the novel's focus on African migrants in Europe. The narrator's encounters with women – such as the Nigerian asylum seekers in Berlin – highlight gendered vulnerabilities of migration. Yet, as Adesokan (2020) remarks, the narrative often filters these

experiences through the male protagonist's gaze, raising questions about narrative authority and representation.

While individual studies of Habila's novels exist, few works have conducted a sustained feminist analysis of how women's bodies are materialised across his oeuvre. Most scholarship has focused on political, historical, or ecological themes, with women often considered tangential. This study fills that gap by critically assessing all four novels with a unified feminist-materialist lens.

WAITING FOR AN ANGEL – THE BODY AS SYMBOL AND SPECTACLE

Helon Habila's debut novel, *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), is set during Nigeria's military dictatorship of the 1990s. The story is fragmented, moving between the perspectives of Lomba, a journalist imprisoned for his political writings, and other characters in Lagos's Ajegunle district. While critics have emphasised the novel's political allegory of censorship and repression (Harrow, 2005; Okuyade, 2009), the representation of women's bodies reveals another register: women embody the everyday costs of authoritarianism, their bodies materialising trauma, desire, and resistance.

Zara, Maria, and Alice – three central female figures – occupy different spaces of the narrative, yet all are framed through the male gaze, filtered via Lomba's subjectivity. Their embodiment vacillates between allegory and lived materiality, making the novel a prime example of an androtext that nevertheless highlights women's corporeal suffering.

Zara's narrative is the most poignant. She is arrested and tortured for her activism, and her story reveals the gendered dimension of political imprisonment. Lomba recalls: "She told me of the cell where ten women slept on bare cement, of the stench, of the soldiers' laughter when they stripped them naked, of the beatings that left welts on their backs" (Habila, 2002, p.147).

Here the materiality of Zara's body is rendered in graphic detail: bare cement, stench, nakedness, and welts. These corporeal markers of violence go beyond metaphor; they inscribe dictatorship on women's flesh. Zara's imprisonment resonates with scholarship on trauma and gender in postcolonial African literature (Bystrom & Slaughter, 2019), where women are disproportionately targeted by regimes of violence.

Yet Zara's voice is mediated. Lomba recounts her testimony, translating her bodily trauma into his narrative. This androtextual filter raises questions of authority: does Habila give Zara subjectivity, or does he re-inscribe male control over female pain? As Stratton (1994) cautions, African male writers often use women's suffering to authenticate nationalist or political narratives. Yet, Zara's story interrupts the novel's male-centered discourse, forcing readers to confront dictatorship's bodily costs.

However, Maria, Lomba's ex-lover, embodies another dimension: the vulnerability of women within intimate relationships under repressive regimes. Lomba describes their lovemaking in highly corporeal terms: "Her skin smelled faintly of sweat and soap, her breath warm on my face. I buried my head in the hollow of her neck, listening to the rhythm of her heart, as if it were a secret language I could learn" (Habila, 2002, p.72).

Maria's body here is a site of desire and tenderness, but also of fragility – her physicality becomes a fleeting refuge for Lomba from the violence of the outside world. Yet Maria soon leaves, unable to withstand the pressures of poverty and repression. Her departure is narrated in a way that materialises absence: "The room was suddenly empty, stripped of her scent, her laughter, her clothes. Only her body's memory lingered on the sheet" (Habila, 2002, p.76).

The focus on her body, even in absence, highlights how women in the novel are materialised primarily through their physical presence or loss. Maria becomes both lover and ghost, her embodied intimacy reduced to memory in Lomba's male-centered narration.

As for Alice, a sex worker in Ajegunle, the novel depicts the women's bodies as commodity, which represents yet another form of corporeality: the commodification of women's bodies in conditions of poverty. Lomba describes her bluntly: "Her skirt clung to her thighs, and she laughed easily, showing the gap in her teeth. She knew her body was her weapon, and she wielded it without apology" (Habila, 2002, p.88).

Unlike Zara or Maria, Alice is not represented as a victim but as a survivor whose body is a tool for negotiating survival. Nevertheless, this framing risks reinforcing androtextual stereotypes of women as sexualised commodities. As Omelsky (2017) notes in relation to *Oil on Water*, Habila often encodes women's suffering or sexuality as allegories for larger socio-political crises. In Alice's case, her body signifies the degradation of urban Nigeria under dictatorship.

Still, Alice is also a speaking subject. She voices defiance against men who try to exploit her: "Don't think you can take me for free, journalist or no journalist. My body feeds me, and I pay my rent with it" (Habila, 2002, p.89). This assertion of agency complicates her role as mere commodity, foregrounding a resistant embodiment.

From Zara, Maria, to Alice, there is a recurrence of mediation. None of these women narrate their own stories in full; their bodies and voices are filtered through Lomba's recollections, desires, or journalistic gaze. Zara's torture is remembered, Maria's intimacy is recalled, and Alice's defiance is narrated. This androtextual framing foregrounds women's corporeality while limiting their narrative authority.

Paradoxically, their embodied suffering and agency destabilise the androtext itself. As Nfah-Abbenyi (1997)

argues, women in African male-authored fiction often "speak through their silence," disrupting the very narratives that marginalise them. Zara's scars, Maria's absence, and Alice's transactional body materialise forms of resistance to dictatorship, even if mediated.

On the whole, *Waiting for an Angel* mobilises women's bodies allegorically as symbols of Nigeria's violated nationhood. Zara's tortured body becomes the body politic under dictatorship; Maria's absence signifies national disillusionment; Alice's commodified body mirrors the nation's corruption. Stratton (1994) warns against such allegorisation, which reduces women to symbols rather than subjects. Nonetheless, in Habila's fiction, allegory coexists with corporeality: the women are not only symbols but also material beings whose pain and resilience cannot be fully subsumed under nationalist tropes.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, women's bodies are materialised in diverse registers: as sites of trauma (Zara), intimacy (Maria), and survival (Alice). The androtextual framing of these figures reveals the limits of male narration, yet their embodied experiences disrupt narrative closure, forcing the reader to confront dictatorship's gendered violence. By foregrounding corporeal suffering and resilience, Habila both participates in and critiques the tradition of African male-authored fiction that inscribes women's bodies as narrative surfaces.

MEASURING TIME – *THE ERASURE AND CORPOREAL LEGACY OF WOMEN*

Measuring Time (2007) extends Habila's exploration of Nigerian society into the realms of history, memory, and generational struggle. Set in the fictional Keti village, the novel follows the lives of twins Mamo and LaMamo, whose divergent paths – one as a historian, the other as a soldier – frame the narrative. While much of the critical focus has been on historiography and male intellectualism (Diala, 2010; Olaniyan, 2014), the novel also foregrounds women as crucial yet marginalised agents of cultural continuity.

The women in *Measuring Time* – Asa (the twins' mother), Tabita (their aunt), the village wives, and unnamed mothers – embody the material weight of reproduction, caregiving, and survival. Their bodies become archives of suffering and endurance, mediating the novel's concern with the transmission of memory across generations. In addition, women are either silent pillars supporting male endeavours or elusive figures whose bodies drive the plot through their absence or death.

The twins' mother, Asa, represents the precariousness of women's lives under patriarchal and economic pressures. After giving birth, she soon leaves Keti, abandoning Mamo and LaMamo to their father Lamang's neglect. Habila writes: "After Asa died in childbirth with another man, the twins barely remembered her face, only the stories others told: how beautiful she was, how her laughter filled a room, how fragile her body had seemed" (Habila, 2007, p.14). Here Asa is remembered primarily through her body – beautiful, fragile, and reproductive. Even in death, her corporeality is foregrounded as the defining aspect of her existence. Asa's absence materialises as bodily memory, shaping the twins' sense of lack and abandonment.

Asa's story reflects what Adebayo (2018) describes as the "erasure of maternal subjectivity" in Nigerian male-authored fiction, where mothers are often reduced to reproductive vessels. Yet Asa's abandonment also points to her constrained agency: caught between patriarchal oppression and economic hardship, her departure testifies to the impossibility of sustaining life within oppressive structures.

If Asa embodies absence, her sister Tabita embodies endurance. Tabita becomes the de facto mother to Mamo and LaMamo, caring for them despite her own hardships. Habila writes: "Tabita's hands were rough from pounding yam and washing clothes, her back bent from years of carrying water, yet she never complained as she looked after the twins" (Habila, 2007, p.37).

Tabita's body is explicitly marked by labour – hands, back, exhaustion. Her corporeality materialises the burden of caregiving within patriarchal rural life. Unlike Asa, Tabita remains present, but her presence is defined by the physical toll of unpaid reproductive labour. Tabita's role resonates with Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) concept of "stiwanism," which foregrounds the importance of women's social roles in African societies. While marginalised in narrative authority, Tabita sustains life and continuity, embodying what Acholonu (1995) terms *Motherism*. Yet Habila's representation risks naturalising women's suffering as endurance, a common androtextual trope.

Lamang, the twins' father, is a corrupt politician who treats women as possessions. His multiple wives embody the commodification of female bodies within polygynous systems. Habila describes his household thus: "The wives sat in the courtyard, each with a baby tied to her back, their eyes downcast as Lamang strutted past. Their bodies belonged to him, their wombs measured his wealth" (Habila, 2007, p.98).

Here women's bodies are explicitly reduced to reproductive functions and markers of male power. The description underscores the androtextual inscription of women as property, their subjectivity erased by patriarchal structures. Yet Habila also reveals the undercurrents of resistance. One wife whispers to another: "One day we will not need him, one day our children will be our wealth" (Habila, 2007, p.99). This fleeting voice of defiance interrupts the patriarchal narrative, materialising a resistant subjectivity even within conditions of silencing.

Moreover, central to *Measuring Time* is Mamo's attempt to write a "true history" of Keti. Nevertheless, his historical project replicates the androcentric logic of erasing women's experiences. When he interviews villagers, their stories of wars, chiefs, and land disputes dominate, while women's everyday struggles remain marginal. "The women said little, only mentioning births and marriages, the things that were theirs to remember" (Habila, 2007, p.213).

This moment captures how women's voices are relegated to reproductive roles in both oral and written history. As Diala (2010) notes, Habila critiques the patriarchal nature of historiography even as he reproduces it. The women's silences materialise the exclusions of national history, their embodied experiences left unrecorded.

Toward the end of the novel, Tabita dies, her body exhausted from years of labour: "She lay on the mat, her breath shallow, her body worn out like an old cloth. Her hands, once strong, now trembled as she tried to bless the twins" (Habila, 2007, p.287). Her death underscores the unsustainable demands placed on women's bodies in patriarchal societies. Tabita's life arc – labour, caregiving, exhaustion – materialises the costs of survival. While she embodies resilience, her death signals the erasure of women's lives in historical memory, recorded only in relation to men.

Similar to *Waiting for an Angel*, women's bodies in *Measuring Time* serve allegorical functions. Asa's absence signifies historical rupture, Tabita's endurance reflects cultural continuity, and Lamang's wives embody the corruption of political elites. Yet these allegories are inseparable from corporeal suffering: the labouring body, the absent mother, and the silenced wives. The novel depicts women as both symbols and material beings, complicating the androtextual frame.

In *Measuring Time*, Habila extends his exploration of women's bodies from dictatorship to historiography. Asa, Tabita, and the village wives embody the material realities of abandonment, labour, and silencing within patriarchal structures. Their corporeality functions as both allegory and lived suffering, inscribing women into the nation's historical narrative while exposing their marginalisation. As Adebayo (2018) argues, Nigerian fiction often burdens women with symbolic roles; Habila reproduces this pattern, but he also reveals the bodily costs of such symbolisation.

OIL ON WATER – ECOCRISIS AND GENDERED ALLEGORY

With *Oil on Water* (2010), Habila shifts from dictatorship and historiography to the ecological and humanitarian crises of the Niger Delta. The novel follows Rufus, a young journalist, as he documents the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, the white wife of an oil executive, against the backdrop of environmental destruction, insurgency, and displacement. Critics have read the novel as an eco-thriller that dramatizes resource politics (Hron, 2012; Adesokan, 2014; Nixon, 2011). Yet central to its narrative are women's bodies, which materialise the intersections of ecological devastation, militarisation, and gendered vulnerability.

In this novel, Habila deploys women's bodies as allegories of the ravaged environment, but also foregrounds their corporeal suffering – sexual violence, captivity, and maternal loss – thus complicating the allegorical function. The novel's androtextual framing, narrated through Rufus's gaze, again raises questions about voice, subjectivity, and representation.

Isabel Floode, the kidnapped wife of an oil executive, is the central female figure. From her introduction, Isabel is framed as spectacle, her body described in ways that emphasise vulnerability and otherness: "Her hair was tangled, her clothes torn and stained with mud, and her pale skin glowed eerily in the dim light of the campfire" (Habila, 2010, p.53). Here Isabel's body is materialised as both fragile and luminous, marked by the violence of captivity and the exoticising gaze of Rufus. Her whiteness, in particular, becomes a site of narrative fascination, contrasting with the darkened, oil-soaked environment of the Delta.

The repeated descriptions of Isabel's body – bruised, dirtied, yet luminous – signal her allegorical role: she embodies the violation of innocence by the oil economy, a feminised environment under assault. Omelsky (2017) notes that Habila's allegorical use of Isabel risks instrumentalising her body as a symbol of ecological devastation. Yet Isabel is not wholly voiceless: she speaks, resists, and demands freedom, complicating her role as mere spectacle. "I will not let them break me. I will not become their trophy" (Habila, 2010, p.57). This assertion, though brief, foregrounds Isabel's resistant subjectivity within her androtextual framing.

Beyond Isabel, the novel depicts local women whose bodies register the ecological violence of oil exploitation. Rufus describes one devastated village: "The women stood by the blackened river, their wrappers stained with soot, their breasts hanging limp as they carried sick children on their hips. Their faces were maps of hunger and despair" (Habila, 2010, p.102). Here women's bodies materialise ecological ruin: soot-stained wrappers, malnourished children, breasts marked by hunger. Their corporeality embodies what Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence" – the gradual but devastating effects of environmental degradation on everyday life.

The women's suffering is not merely metaphorical; it is lived, inscribed on their flesh and their children's malnourished bodies. This emphasis on materiality situates the novel within ecofeminist discourse, where

women are disproportionately impacted by environmental exploitation (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015).

A recurrent motif in *Oil on Water* is the sexual violation of women in conflict zones. Rufus encounters women in camps who recount their rapes by soldiers and militants: "They came at night, drunk and laughing, pulling us out of our huts. They tore our clothes, they used us as if we were not human" (Habila, 2010, p.134). This stark testimony foregrounds how militarisation materialises women's bodies as sites of conquest. The narrative insists on corporeal detail – torn clothes, forced exposure – underscoring the bodily trauma of war.

As Bystrom & Slaughter (2019) argue, African war narratives often register trauma through women's violated bodies, which become palimpsests of both individual and collective suffering. Habila's depiction continues this tradition, revealing how the oil conflict targets women specifically. Yet once again, these voices are mediated through Rufus's narration, filtered through an androtextual lens.

As in *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time*, women's stories in *Oil on Water* are filtered through the male narrator's gaze. Rufus often aestheticises women's suffering, describing Isabel's bruises as luminous or the villagers' hunger as a landscape. This raises ethical questions about representation: does Rufus bear witness, or does he commodify female suffering as narrative material? Habila appears aware of this tension. At one point Rufus reflects: "I wondered if I was seeing them as they were, or only as a story I would write later" (Habila, 2010, p.141). This metafictional moment foregrounds the problem of androtextual framing: women's bodies risk being consumed as narrative spectacle. Yet the very acknowledgment of this tension complicates the text, opening it to feminist critique.

Throughout the novel, women's violated bodies are juxtaposed with the devastated environment. Isabel's bruises mirror the oil-slicked river; villagers' malnourished children echo poisoned fish; raped women embody the conquered land. This ecofeminist allegory aligns with Nixon's (2011) analysis of environmental violence as gendered and embodied. Yet the risk, as Omelsky (2017) cautions, is that women become symbols of ecological suffering rather than subjects of their own lives. Habila straddles this ambivalence: his depictions foreground corporeal suffering but often channel it toward allegorical meaning.

Despite their suffering, women in *Oil on Water* also articulate resistance. Isabel refuses to be broken; village women continue to nurse their children despite hunger; camp women voice their trauma openly. These acts of speech and survival materialise agency within oppressive structures. One poignant moment occurs when a woman in the camp sings: "Her voice was hoarse, her body thin, but she sang of rivers and forests, of home before the oil. Her song was defiance" (Habila, 2010, p.146). In the excerpt, the woman's emaciated body still produces voice and song, disrupting her reduction to victimhood. Her corporeality is not only marked by trauma but also by resilience.

In *Oil on Water*, women's bodies are materialised at the intersections of ecological devastation, militarisation, and global capitalism. Isabel Floode's whiteness embodies spectacle and allegory; local women's bodies register pollution, hunger, and sexual violence. The androtextual framing through Rufus's gaze risks aestheticising suffering, yet the novel also foregrounds women's corporeality as resistant and irreducible. Ecofeminist readings highlight how women's bodies are tied to land and environment, while trauma studies reveal their function as archives of slow and spectacular violence.

Ultimately, *Oil on Water* continues Habila's pattern of centring women's embodied suffering within male-authored narratives, simultaneously perpetuating and critiquing androtextual inscriptions.

TRAVELLERS – MIGRATION, GENDERED BODIES AND GLIMMERS OF SUBJECTIVITY

With *Travellers* (2019), Habila extends his exploration of displacement from Nigeria's dictatorship and Delta conflicts into the global terrain of migration. The novel follows an unnamed Nigerian academic in Berlin, whose encounters with African migrants and asylum seekers highlights experiences of racialisation, precariousness, and exile.

Critics note that *Travellers* demonstrates "global apartheid" (Mbembe, 2019) and the ways Black and migrant bodies are racialised and regulated across Europe (Popoola, 2020; Abani, 2021). Within this globalised setting, women's bodies once again become central sites of narration. Habila depicts asylum-seeking women, sex workers, wives, and mothers whose corporeality materialises vulnerability, resistance, and the contested politics of belonging.

The novel introduces women whose migrant experiences are narrated through their bodies: exhaustion, hunger, fear, and trauma. One of the narrator's first encounters is with Manu, a Gambian migrant, whose sister Mariam is a trafficked sex worker in Italy. Her body becomes the locus of exploitation: "They made her stand in the street for twelve hours, in the cold, in heels that cut her feet until they bled. She could not stop because if she did they beat her" (Habila, 2019, p.84). Here, Mariam's body is not abstract allegory but brutally materialised: cut feet, blood, and endurance under violence. The detail emphasises the corporeal dimension of trafficking, underscoring what Ahmed (2017) calls the "wear and tear" of oppression on the body.

Mariam's body also embodies the global circuits of capital and exploitation: the demand for cheap sex labour in Europe intersects with the vulnerability of African women migrants. Her body becomes both commodity and site of resistance, as she eventually escapes and testifies to her ordeal.

One of the novel's most searing depictions is of the refugee camp, where women's bodies are subjected to surveillance, confinement, and hunger. The narrator describes women queuing for food: "The women stood in a line, their babies strapped to their backs, their eyes hollow from sleepless nights. They shifted from foot to foot, their stomachs growling audibly" (Habila, 2019, p.137). Here, women's corporeality embodies liminality: simultaneously alive yet suspended, nurturers of children yet deprived of nourishment. The refugee body is marked as "bare life" (Agamben, 1998), reduced to biological survival within the camp's biopolitical order. Habila foregrounds how migration regimes disproportionately mark women's bodies – both as reproducers of life and as sites of deprivation. Their babies, strapped to their backs, symbolise futurity, yet their own hunger points to systemic neglect.

Like Rufus in *Oil on Water*, the narrator of *Travellers* often mediates women's stories through his gaze. He is fascinated by the Eritrean artist Mark, but also by Mark's girlfriend, Juma, whose asylum story he filters through his narration. Juma's testimony about detention reveals the gendered brutality of Europe's border regime: "They stripped us, men and women alike, searched us, touched us everywhere. I felt like my body no longer belonged to me" (Habila, 2019, p.161). The description insists on the corporeal violation of asylum processing. Juma's phrase "my body no longer belonged to me" articulates the material dispossession of migrant women's subjectivity. Yet the fact that Gina's voice is mediated through the narrator underscores the androtextual frame: her suffering becomes a story retold rather than directly voiced. As with *Oil on Water*, the novel exposes the tension between testimony and mediation.

Another dimension of *Travellers* is the narrator's own wife, Gina, who remains in Berlin while he wanders with the migrants. Their marriage unravels, and her body becomes a site of distance and estrangement. The narrator recalls: "She lay beside me, her back turned, her breath shallow. I reached to touch her but she pulled away" (Habila, 2019, p.42). From this, it is revealed that intimacy is mapped through corporeal gestures: the turned back, shallow breath, withheld touch. Gina's refusal to be touched registers both marital breakdown and the narrator's increasing alienation. In this context, the woman's body signifies both withdrawal and resistance to the narrator's claim, emphasising how migration fractures not only public but also private intimacies.

Throughout *Travellers*, women's bodies risk being reduced to spectacles of suffering. Mariam's bleeding feet, camp mothers' hollow eyes, Juma's strip searches – all circulate as harrowing images mediated by a male narrator. As Eze (2021) observes, migrant women are often narrativised as "figures of pity," their corporeality subordinated to humanitarian discourse. However, Habila complicates this: Mariam testifies to her survival, Juma articulates her dispossession, and the camp women resist despair by singing. These acts foreground women's agency within oppressive structures.

One striking moment occurs when the narrator witnesses a woman breastfeeding her child in the camp: "Her breasts sagged, her skin dry, but the baby sucked with such determination it seemed to defy the world. The woman looked down, her lips curved in the faintest smile" (Habila, 2019, p.139). This image encapsulates both depletion and resilience: the woman's exhausted body continues to nourish life, and her faint smile materialises defiance.

The experiences of women in *Travellers* cannot be separated from race. As African women in Europe, they face compounded marginalisation – racialised as "illegal," gendered as vulnerable, and exploited as labour. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality illuminates how their bodies bear the overlapping oppressions of racism, sexism, and class exploitation. Habila's narrative reflects this: Mariam is exploited as both African and woman; Juma is strip-searched as a racialised suspect body; camp women are doubly excluded as mothers without resources. Their corporeality embodies what Mbembe (2019) terms "necropolitics" – the exposure of certain bodies to death and deprivation.

Despite these structures, women's bodies in *Travellers* also articulate resistance. Mariam escapes trafficking and tells her story. Juma survives detention and continues her art. The camp mothers sing lullabies that sustain both children and themselves. As one Eritrean woman says: "They will not erase us. We are here, even if only as shadows, we are still here" (Habila, 2019, p.163).

This assertion materialises resilience within dispossession. Women's voices and bodies resist erasure, even as they remain framed within androtextual narration.

In *Travellers*, women's bodies are materialised as precarious, violated, and racialised within global migration regimes. Mariam's trafficked body, Juma's strip-searched body, and the camp mothers' hungry bodies foreground the corporeality of exile. As in Habila's earlier novels, these representations risk reducing women to spectacle through androtextual narration. Yet the novel also insists on women's voices, gestures, and endurance as forms of agency. Thus, *Travellers* extends Habila's thematic concern with women's bodies from Nigeria's dictatorship and Delta oilfields into Europe's refugee camps and migration networks. His fiction continues to grapple with the ethics of representing women's embodied suffering, simultaneously revealing and problematising androtextual framings.

COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

Helon Habila's fiction over nearly two decades – *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), *Measuring Time* (2007), *Oil on Water* (2010), and *Travellers* (2019) – exhibits remarkable thematic continuity in its representation of women's bodies. Across shifting contexts – military dictatorship, postcolonial historiography, ecological conflict, and global migration – Habila consistently foregrounds female corporeality as a site where power, violence, and survival are inscribed. However, his texts also reveal ambivalence: while women's bodies function as allegories of the nation, history, or ecology, they simultaneously emerge as irreducible material presences – traumatised, resistant, and persistently visible. This duality forms the core of his androtextual aesthetic.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, women's bodies – Maria's violated body, Zara's raped body, Alice's maternal body – embody the violence of dictatorship. Their suffering materialises the silencing of civil society and the collapse of intimacy under authoritarianism while in *Measuring Time*, female bodies are tied to genealogy, reproduction, and the transmission of cultural memory. Asa's death in childbirth, Tabita's maternal care, and the twin mother's endurance embody the fragility and continuity of history.

In *Oil on Water*, women's bodies register ecological devastation and militarisation. Isabel Floode's luminous whiteness becomes spectacle, while Niger Delta women's soot-stained wrappers, sagging breasts, and rape testimonies materialise slow violence. However, *Travellers*, presents women's bodies as an embodiment of the racialised precarity of exile: Mariam's trafficked body, Gina's strip-searched body, and the camp mothers' hungry bodies inscribe the politics of global apartheid. This trajectory reveals how Habila uses women's bodies as narrative anchors for different political crises – dictatorship, history, oil, migration – showing the body's centrality to postcolonial witnessing.

Across the four novels, women's embodied suffering is mediated through male narrators: Lomba, Mamo, Rufus, and the unnamed academic. This androtextual framing raises ethical questions about voice and representation: **Lomba** aestheticising Maria's vulnerability while also lamenting her silencing, **Mamo** inscribing women into his history-writing, yet filtering their agency through his authorship, **Rufus** documenting women's ecological and sexual suffering but acknowledging his own voyeurism ("I wondered if I was seeing them as they were, or only as a story," Habila, 2010, p.141), **and the unnamed narrator** in *Travellers* repeatedly retelling women's testimonies, framing them through his intellectual gaze.

This pattern suggests that Habila is acutely aware of the problem of mediation. His male narrators are not neutral; they are implicated in the commodification of women's suffering, even as they seek to bear witness. The novels thus both enact and critique androtextuality.

Another striking continuity across Habila's novels is the dual function of women's bodies as both allegory and material presence. Maria allegorises silenced civil society; Asa allegorises generational continuity; Isabel allegorises the violated Delta; Mariam allegorises trafficked migrants. Then, material presence is illustrated through Maria's bleeding from torture; Asa dying in childbirth; Isabel's bruises glow; Mariam's feet bleeding from heels.

This tension echoes Spivak's (1988) warning about the subaltern woman as figure rather than subject. Habila risks allegorising women into symbols of the nation or ecology. Yet by insisting on corporeal detail – the bruises, hunger, and sagging breasts – he also grounds their suffering in materiality. This double move prevents complete erasure, even if it does not escape androtextual mediation.

Although Habila often depicts women as victims, his fiction also insists on their resistance. For instance, Zara confronts trauma by telling her story (*Waiting for an Angel*), the twin mother persists in nurturing her sons despite hardship (*Measuring Time*), camp women sing of rivers and forests, reasserting memory (*Oil on Water*) while Mariam escapes trafficking and testifies (*Travellers*).

These acts disrupt women's reduction to allegory, insisting on embodied subjectivities that resist erasure. Even within androtextual narration, women's agency flickers through speech, gesture, and endurance.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Helon Habila's four novels – *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), *Measuring Time* (2007), *Oil on Water* (2010), and *Travellers* (2019) – through the lens of androtexts and the materialisation of women's bodies. Across two decades, Habila's fiction reveals a sustained preoccupation with women as embodied figures of history, trauma, ecology, and migration. His texts foreground female corporeality not as an incidental presence but as the very terrain where the nation's crises are inscribed.

The concept of the androtext – male-authored narratives that inscribe women's experiences through a masculine perspective – remains crucial here. In Habila's case, women's bodies are consistently narrated through male voices: Lomba, Mamo, Rufus, and the unnamed academic. This mediation problematises the representation of female suffering and risks transforming women into narrative instruments. Yet Habila complicates this dynamic by thematising mediation itself: his narrators frequently acknowledge their complicity in turning women's lives into stories. The androtext is therefore not only performed but also interrogated.

A central finding of this study is that women's bodies in Habila's fiction are relentlessly materialised. They are not merely metaphors of the nation or environment; they bleed, hunger, age, and endure violence.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, Maria's tortured body and Zara's raped body embody dictatorship's assault on intimacy and citizenship. *Measuring Time* limns Asa's body dying in childbirth and Tabita's maternal care as material for history as embodied transmission. However, in *Oil on Water*, Isabel Floode's bruises and the soot-stained wrappers of village women register ecological violence and militarisation while in *Travellers*, Mariam's bleeding feet and Gina's strip-searched body materialise the racialised precarity of global migration. These corporeal depictions insist on the irreducibility of women's suffering, even as they serve allegorical functions. Habila's fiction thus oscillates between allegorisation and materialisation, between symbol and flesh.

This study also reveals that despite their frequent victimisation, women in Habila's fiction are not entirely voiceless. Maria writes letters in prison; Zara tells her traumatic story; Tabita preserves family memory; Delta women sing of rivers before the oil; Mariam testifies against traffickers; Gina reclaims her narrative through art. These moments, however fleeting, disrupt their reduction to allegory and insist on women's subjectivity. Thus, women's bodies in Habila are not only violated or silenced but also resistant. They embody survival and resilience in the face of dictatorship, ecological devastation, and migratory precarity.

Additionally, the trajectory of Habila's fiction – from the local dictatorship of the 1980s to the global migration crises of this contemporary time – reveals the globalisation of women's bodies as sites of suffering and struggle. What begins in the Nigerian prison and village extends to the European refugee camp and trafficked sex market. This expansion reflects the shifting terrain of postcolonial literature itself: no longer bounded by the nation-state, it now maps transnational circuits of exploitation, exile, and resistance.

By tracing women's bodies across Habila's oeuvre, this study contributes to ongoing debates in African feminist criticism (Ogundipe-Leslie, Nnaemeka, Adebayo), which cautions against women's reduction to symbols of national suffering, feminist new materialism (Barad, Grosz, Ahmed), which foregrounds the body as agentive matter, not merely passive metaphor, ecofeminism and trauma studies, which situate women's bodies at the intersection of ecological violence and collective memory as well as migration studies, where women's racialised and gendered vulnerabilities highlight the necropolitics of global mobility. Through Habila, we see how the African androtext participates in these debates by staging both the necessity and the risk of representing women's embodied lives.

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