



## Research Article

# The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy In Nigeria: An Ecocritical Analysis of Habila's *The Chibok Girls*

## ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism, a study of literature in relation to the environment has become one of the tools post-colonial writers use in addressing environmental concerns. The environment is seen as a character acting along with humans in literary texts. A violation of nature therefore affects all the characters. The urgency for examining literature from an ecological angle is therefore justified. Anchored on ecocriticism, this paper adopts a qualitative method analysis to argue that corruption, coups d'état and the activities of terrorists create a hostile environment that needs serious discourse engagement. This paper discusses the environmental issues raised in Habila's *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*. The study concludes that the Nigerian environment, and by extension the African one, is at the brink of destruction because there is a causal relationship between corruption, coups d'état, terrorism and ecophobia. The first one breeds the others.

**Keywords:** Boko Haram, Ecocriticism, Corruption, Nigeria, Terrorism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Exploitation of nature and abuse of the environment for the benefit of human civilization has marginalized mother nature “into a hazy backdrop against which the rational human subject struts upon”.<sup>2</sup> The exploitation of natural resources and recently, the increasing activities of terrorists have resulted in frequent ecological disasters around the globe. As such, our environment is at a margin. Consequently, instilling environmental consciousness in man through ecocriticism is one of the major ways to “debate nature in order to defend nature”.<sup>3</sup> Ecocriticism, a critique of the environment, “is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”<sup>4</sup> or “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature”.<sup>5</sup> Ecocritics study the ways nature is portrayed in the body of the text and attempt to analyze their relevance to environmental crises with the aim of creating a “consciousness of the essential unity of all life”.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, how nature is represented in the novel, the role the physical setting plays in the plot and themes of the novel, the role of characters in championing environmental issues or otherwise, just to mention but a few. Ecocriticism is not just about analyzing nature in literature but it advocates a move towards a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, and a broadening of humans’ conception of global community to include non-human life forms and the environment.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence,” in Glotfelty and Fromm, *Literary Ecology*, (Athens, Georgia and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Coupe, *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm, (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Rueckert, William, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” in Glotfelty and Fromm (1996): 105-123.

<sup>6</sup> R. Eisler, “The Gaia Tradition and Partnership Future: An Ecofeminist Manifesto”, in Diamond, Irene and Ornstein, Gloria, *Reweaving the World*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987) 26.

Ecocritics believe that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems.<sup>7</sup> They therefore posit that, “it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer”<sup>8</sup> and so the environmental crisis is a question that cannot be overlooked in literary studies since the physical environment and human culture are connected and affected by each other. It is for this reason that this paper seeks to explore the ecocritical perspectives as envisioned in Helon Habila’s *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (referred to hereafter as *The Chibok Girls*). This environmentally oriented study of the story could instill ecological literacy and awareness among readers.

Discussions in this paper are guided by three basic research questions: what is ecocriticism, how does Habila express ecological concerns in his work by establishing a link between corruption, coups d’état, terrorism and the environment and how do these ecological perspectives affect both man and the environment? The objectives of the preceding questions are to provide an understanding of ecocriticism, explain how Habila integrates issues of mismanagement, coups d’état, terrorism and environmental concerns into his narrative and account for the manner in which both humans and the environment are affected by environmental concerns in the narrative. The paper discusses environmental issues in Habila’s work by presenting an introduction, an exegesis on the theory of ecocriticism, a literature review, a synopsis of Habila’s work in context, a content analysis of the primary text and a conclusion to the study.

## THEORY

Most social commentators are of the view that the past century has been marked by three important discourses: the civil rights movement, feminism(s) and environmental activism.<sup>9</sup> Though these three narratives may seem unrelated, the common and true denominator that connects all of them is their rejection of the “hierarchical and patriarchal and systems of possession and domination”.<sup>10</sup> The number of existing international treaties and the much publicised activities by environmental organisations such as Greenpeace, Earth First! and Earthwatch indicate an increased awareness about the importance and the need to protect the environment so that it supports all lives depending on it. This heightened awareness is also matched by an increased interest in investigating the relationship between ecology and literature.

The term ecocriticism was first used by William Rueckert in 1978 in an essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”.<sup>11</sup> The term, however, became popular during the 1990s and has since been referred to in different instances as ecopoetics, literary ecology, environmental literary criticism or green cultural studies. Despite the existence of these terminologies, ecocriticism as a term is still the most popular and has been defined and expanded by different scholars along the line.

Glotfelty and Fromm defined ecocriticism as the study of (literary) texts that involve the physical environment.<sup>12</sup> Marshall<sup>13</sup> explained it as criticism informed by ecological sensitivity and Heise<sup>14</sup> expanded the definition to include all genres that participate actively in the environmental narrative. To Sahu<sup>15</sup>, ecocriticism “is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment.” Thus ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary study since it combines ecology and literary criticism. It is a combination of a natural science with a humanistic discipline in order to direct humanity’s conscience towards the interdependence and the interrelatedness of life between the environment, human life and non-human life.

## PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE

This section of the literature review is divided into four thematic areas: colonial ecocriticism, cultural ecocriticism, works on ecocriticism and the environment and literature review on Habila's *The Chibok Girls*. Protecting the environment has posed a great challenge to human society in the last few decades. Consequently, an awareness about the connection between the environment and literature has been displayed by creative writers with a focus on environmental degradation taking centre stage. Highlighting land and environmental issues, Chinua Achebe, traditionally, has been engaged in nature writing.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Garrard, “The Romantics’ View of Nature”, *In Spirit of the Environment, Religion, Value and Environmental Concern*, Ed., David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer, (London: Routledge, 2004), 113-130.

<sup>8</sup> Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (London: Blackwell, 1995), 151

<sup>9</sup> Erika Lemmer, “Ecocriticism”, *JLS/TSW* 23, no. 3(2007):223.

<sup>10</sup> Lemmer, “Ecocriticism”, 223.

<sup>11</sup> William Rueckert “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (London: The University of Georgia Press) 1996

<sup>12</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm, (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Marshall. “The Ecocritical Heritage” In *Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, (Salt Lake City: Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment)1994.

<sup>14</sup> Ursula K. Heise, “Forum on Literatures of The Environment”, *PMLA* 114, no. 5, (1999): 1089-1104.

<sup>15</sup> Geeta. Sahu, “Ecocriticism: Understanding the Relationship Between Literature and Environment in Indian English Novels”, *Sai Om Journal of Arts and Education* 1, no. 1(2014): 23

Gitanjali,<sup>16</sup> argues that *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1965) bear sufficient proof of the writer addressing the theme of nature and environment though Achebe may not have shown awareness about ecological crisis in his novels. In fact, the first novel is set in pre-colonial Igbo land and the second novel is set in the early colonial period. Both narratives show the violation of nature and the environment due to colonial invasion. Gitanjali contends that in their attempt to spread Christianity, the missionaries stripped nature and environment of all the spiritual meanings held deeply by the Igbos. Gitanjali concludes that the colonial period marked the destruction of nature for the advancement of colonial enterprise. A similar opinion is expressed by Okoye-Ugwu<sup>17</sup> who posits that Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, wanted his African readers to be aware of how deep-rooted their forefathers were in the environment. In her view, the novel is about a clan which once thought like one, spoke like one, shared a common awareness, and acted like one. The arrival of the white man disrupted the unity of this serene and unified agrarian community. She concludes that one of the things that fell apart in the continent with the coming of the colonialists was the special relationship between the African and his environment.

On cultural ecocriticism, Mishra<sup>18</sup> also explores the cultural clash between the civilised and the disadvantaged regarding their attitude to nature as evidenced in Bandyopadhyay's *Aranyak-Of the Forest*. The study shows that though the marginalised people take better care of nature, they become an easy prey to the evil design of the capitalist society. She believes nature is at her best when it is uncontaminated by population, industrialisation, smoke and noise.

With regard to ecocriticism and the environment, Estok,<sup>19</sup> argues that there are four seemingly disparate and disconnected topics — war, migration, ecophobia, and life which need to be discussed seriously in order to produce deeper understandings of both the production and effects of post 9/11 terrorist attack on the US narratives. This is because war, migration, ecophobia, and life are directly intertwined and they all have a domino effect on one another. Estok argues that narrative landscapes changed radically since the beginning of the twenty-first century and that this resulted in a combined effect both of terror reportage and of environmental crisis narratives since terror and environmental crisis are directly related. In his other article published in 2013, Estok<sup>20</sup> argues that we cannot ignore the context of terror in which ecocriticism works and that the relationships between the imagining of terror on the one hand and the conceptualizing of hostile environments on the other is in very serious need of critical analysis. Estok believes changes in how we think about nature are long overdue, as are changes in how we think about doing ecocriticism. He concludes that it is necessary to theorise about ecophobia, terror, and tragedy. But in addition to the link between war, migration, ecophobia, and life, Worcester also adds a principal cause of war and terror and that is corruption. According to Worcester<sup>21</sup>, the “general weakness of central government and high levels of corruption make it easier to operate in Africa” for terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and other Iranian-backed groups with links to Hezbollah. In a similar vein, Olanrewaju<sup>22</sup> contends that the recent phenomenon of Boko Haram in Nigeria has become a subject of concern in the country. It is one of the major impediments to global peace and security in contemporary world and the rate of terrorism all over the globe is alarming. He argues that terrorism is spreading like a wildfire in every part of the world and its impact is beyond the location of the actual incident.

Courtois examines the interplay of politics and poetics in *The Chibok Girls*.<sup>23</sup> In the researcher's view, Habila shows commitment as a functional artist by exposing the paradox of the Nigerian situation: a country that is rich in oil but is unable to provide a better life to its people due to bad governance and corruption. Such a situation leads to the breeding of hostile environments which are volatile to internal conflicts. In a review by Larson on *The Chibok Girls* and posted on *CounterPunch Podcast*, the author gives a damning account of the failed leadership, ethnic tensions, squandered oil wealth and other issues that have brought Nigeria to its knees. The author doubts how Nigeria can come out of this quagmire that it created for itself.<sup>24</sup> Maiangwa and Amao<sup>25</sup> also looked at why and how women and girls have become important to the Boko Haram reign of terror in Nigeria using *The Chibok Girls* as their primary text.

<sup>16</sup> Gogoi Gitanjali, “An Ecocritical Approach to Chinua Achebe's *Things fall part and Arrow of God*”, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 19, no. 11 (2014):1-4.

<sup>17</sup> S. Okoye-Ugwu, going green: An ecocritical reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Sandip Kumar Mishra, The Marginalised Vs. The Civilised: An Ecocritical Approach to Bibhutibhusan, *The Creative Launcher*1, no. 6 (2017).

<sup>19</sup> Simon C. Estok, “Post 9/11 and narratives of life writing, conflict, and environmental crisis”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17(3), (2015): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2780>

<sup>20</sup> Simon. C. Estok, “Ecocriticism in an age of terror”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 15(1), (2013): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2180>.

<sup>21</sup> Maxim Worcester, “Combating Terrorism in Africa” ISPSW: Berlin, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/50103/Combating\\_Terrorism\\_Africa.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/50103/Combating_Terrorism_Africa.pdf), accessed on 20th April, 2020

<sup>22</sup> J. S. Olanrewaju, “Globalisation of Terrorism: A Case Study of Boko Haram in Nigeria”, *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance* 6, no. 6(2015):1-22

<sup>23</sup> J  dric Courtois, “In This Country, The Very Air We Breathe Is Politics”: Helon Habila and The Flowing Together of Politics and Poetics”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 40, no. 2(2018):55-68.

<sup>24</sup> Charles R. Larson. “Review: Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*” *CounterPunch.org*, Dec. 9, 2016, [www.counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org).

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Maiangwa, and Olumuyiwa Babatunde Amao, ““Daughters, Brides, and Supporters of the Jihad”: Revisiting the Gender-Based Atrocities of Boko Haram in Nigeria”, *African Renaissance* 12, no. 2(2015): 117-144.

The consequences of these attacks and how the government can fight them have also been looked at. The publications reviewed here and others online have not looked at the novel from the ecocriticism perspective. This paper takes the discussion further by exploring the ecocritical perspectives envisioned in *The Chibok Girls*.

### Synopsis of the Novel

On April 14, 2014, two hundred and seventy-six (276) girls from the Chibok Secondary School in northern Nigeria were kidnapped by a terrorist group named Jama'atu Ahlis Surina Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, meaning "the people committed to the propaganda of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad," but nicknamed Boko Haram which was founded by Mohammed Yusuf. Fifty-seven (57) of the girls escaped, but the rest of them have never been heard from again. Habila tells the stories of the girls and the anguish of their parents. He chronicles the rise of Boko Haram and the Nigerian government's inept response to the situation in this three-part novel.<sup>26</sup>

In part one, Habila contrasts the period in Nigeria when corrupt policemen at the checkpoints would take bribes, to the present situation where the checkpoints are guarded by soldiers in full war gear. As Habila recounts the narrative of the areas affected by the operations of Boko Haram, he pauses and gives some background history of the dreaded sect, their early beginnings, who they are, and what they supposedly stand for. The beginning of the terrorist activities and the invasion of a Federal Government College in the town of Buni Yadi, in Yobe State, on February 25, 2014, where fifty-nine (59) boys were murdered in cold blood are also talked about. He also gives a sad account of the dreadful day the girls were taken. An interview is granted to a mother and the reader goes through the terror of that day as the mother recounts her ordeal. In between the narration, Habila also retells the political history of Nigeria with its attendant crimes, religious violence, kidnappings and incidents of robbery.<sup>27</sup>

Part two describes the Boko Haram Heartland, Gombe State, the casualty town where Internally Displaced Persons (popularly called the IDPs, people who fled their states to take refuge in neighboring states) live. Again, the Nigeria history is brought to the fore. The history of the Sokoto Caliphate that gave birth to the spread of Islam and the establishment of northern emirates, including the Gombe emirate is recounted.<sup>28</sup> In Part three, Habila returns to Chibok and finally meets with two of the fifty-six (56) lucky girls who escaped and they narrate their story.<sup>29</sup>

### Data analysis

Depicting a torturous path of terror, *The Chibok Girls*, is one of the saddest stories of post-colonial era. Employing the journey motif style of narration, Habila makes bare the dreadful effects of Boko Haram's exploitative activities on man and the environment by presenting to us three kinds of environments in the novel: the environment before Boko Haram, the environment during the attack and the environment after the attack.

Habila describes the peace Nigeria enjoyed before the Boko Haram attack by painting the political situation in Nigeria and incorporating a brief history of Chibok. Captioning the pre-terrorist environment "peace time," he describes the political situation in Nigeria in a subdued humour, symbolised by policemen at checkpoints who take bribe. Habila describes police check points as "distortion points,"<sup>30</sup> a regular feature of road travel in Nigeria and which Nigerians have become accustomed to like the way "they have resigned to the lack of electricity or running water"<sup>31</sup> The road blocks which are meant to enforce traffic laws and ensure travelers' safety, have turned into symbols of exploitation and corruption where "taxes are paid at gun point fully knowing the taxes will not go to the state coffers but end up in private hands".<sup>32</sup> Habila observes further that:

Before the insurgency, the blocks were manned by policemen who'd chat with you about the weather or about the traffics as you handed them their bribe. They'd even give you change if you had no small notes....there was a sign warning drivers that it is illegal to give bribes at checkpoints, with phone numbers to call if a policeman solicited bribe... Abbas told me he had tried the numbers and they didn't work.<sup>33</sup>

This technique of irony in addition to displaying an ability to link the events of the past to those of the present reminds readers, and by extension the post-colonial Nigerian, of the corrupt nature of the state institutions in Nigeria. This flashback technique is remarkable as we are presented with a contrast where Nigeria before the insurgency is discussed against a backdrop of the Boko Haram era. With all these corrupt acts and bad governance, Habila thinks it was still "peace time" in Nigeria before the Boko Haram insurgency since nature was not interfered with in any significant

<sup>26</sup> *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*, (New York : Colombia Global Report, 2016), 1-129.

<sup>27</sup> Habila, *The Chibok Girls*, 1-64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 64-90.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 90-129

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 7.

manner. All was not rosy due to the debilitating effect of corruption on the economy and the lives of the people. However, the citizens enjoyed a better peaceful environment as compared to the one created through the Boko Haram activities in the story. In adopting this flashback narrative technique, Habila helps readers to appreciate the relative peace in Nigeria before the insurgency. Again, he does not only carry his readers along with him, he also attempts to stir up the feelings of his readers when he starts telling the story of the insurgency. With this technique, the reader, like a stranger, trails after the author, as the author guides him or her into an unknown territory, the physical and psychological territory of kidnapping. In fact, this psychologically unknown territory is the relationship between terrorism and corruption: that corruption is a catalyst for terrorist activities and other internal conflicts as it has been illustrated time and again in many an African nation such as Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and so on. In a country that is endowed with natural resources which generate additional revenue and such additional revenue is not used to improve the welfare of the people but is it rather used to improve the lot of the political elite alone, sections of the population are likely to rise up in arms to demand their fair share of such a revenue. This is what pitches such activist groups against the state leading to the creation of a hostile environment. All the countries cited as examples in this paragraph have not been able to fairly use revenues generated from their natural resources to provide an improved life for all their citizens and hence the eruption of conflicts of violence leading to the creation of hostile environments in such countries.

Again, Habila incorporates a brief history of Chibok to prove that the people already lived in a hostile environment before the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency. We are told that Chibok is a poor and neglected town, whose populace are farmers and their life has been fairly uneventful in terms of terrorism but that the people have been ill-served by successive governments. Thus the past governments' failure to help lift the area out of the doldrums of poverty is already a catalyst for the populace to be easily tricked by unscrupulous people into taking up arms against the state. With this background information, we are made to experience a spectacle of the physically violent free but hostile environment in Chibok which is juxtaposed against human destructive interference in the environment later on when the Boko Haram movement attacks the town. Thus, with the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency, hostility in the environment is further aggravated.

Habila skillfully presents the current situation immediately after the flashback: "Now the checkpoints were guarded by scowling, uncommunicative soldiers in full war gear".<sup>34</sup> He then takes us along on a journey through a number of states in northern Nigeria. This description of the soldiers is indicative of a hostile environment. As Habila journeys to Chibok, we notice more of this change in the environment as a harrowing account of the damage Boko Haram has done to Nigerian is recounted. We witness insecure zones still susceptible to attacks, lots of road blocks whose surroundings have become almost like settlements buzzing with displaced people now posing as beggars or idlers, and boys and girls out of school due to the insurgency.<sup>35</sup> Habila again exposes us to burned tanks, and military trucks at the road sides rusting away, schools burnt down in villages, villages abandoned, walls pockmarked by bullet holes and houses with caved in roofs.<sup>36</sup> In addition to these, basic amenities are destroyed in most communities. For instance, telephone and electricity services are cut off, there is no running water, banks are closed like most other services.<sup>37</sup> This harrowing description marks the destruction of nature. It is also indicative of the disrupted bond between nature and man, reminding us that "nature can no longer be understood outside of society, or society outside of nature".<sup>38</sup> This destruction holds the readers spellbound and throws us into a war zone, creating a terror environment for Nigerians whose lives have been transformed by terrorist activities. Again, it indicates how profound the horror of war can be.

The account is made a lot more real, with the harrowing and humiliating experiences of travelers in the hands of military men:

...at the checkpoints passengers in commercial vehicles had to get out and approach the soldiers on foot...male passengers had to take off their shirts and raise their hands ... they presented their id cards to compare them to the 100 most wanted Boko Haram members prominently displayed at every checkpoint.<sup>39</sup>

Habila captures the current ecological state of affairs in Chibok with this compelling portrait of a troubled environment through this picturesque narration. Due to the closely knit relationship between man and the environment; a damage to the environment affects man in all spheres of life. The people's bond with the environment is damaged as symbolised in this imagery of a hostile environment, and we can easily contrast that with what the situation was before through the flashback technique provided at the beginning of the novel. Through this description, readers descend with the author to the pain the terrorists have inflicted on the people physically, emotionally, psychologically and ecologically.

<sup>34</sup> Habila, *The Chibok Girls*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. (Mark Ritter. London: Sage, 1992), 80

<sup>39</sup> Habila, *The Chibok Girls*, 9.

Habila uses the technique of digression in the narration and gives some background history of Boko Haram. Habila explains that, in the traditional precolonial era, education meant Islamic education and nothing else, and it was a tolerant religion accommodating tradition and diversity and did not view the rest of the world through a puritanical lens. All that changed in the 1980s with the *Maitatsine* (meaning one who curses) uprising led by Muhammadu Marwa. The history of Mohammed Yusuf, founder of Boko Haram, his intention to create a parallel state run on strict sharia law, free of what he considered the corrupting influence of democracy, western education and western way of life, how he was killed in 2009 and the establishment of northern emirates, including the Gombe emirate is recounted. External factors that played a part in the radicalization of Boko Haram such as American war on terror after September 11, the Iraqi war and US invasion of Afghanistan are recounted. The significance of this digression is that, it equips readers with adequate information about the lives and activities of the terrorists. For instance, we get to know that economic disparities between the oil-rich south and the poverty stricken north, a rising population and subsequent mass unemployment led many marginalised Muslims in the north to turn to religion and thus making the north become a breeding ground for jihadists.<sup>40</sup> We are also well equipped with information about what Boko Haram stand for (opposed to modernism and to all forms of western influence), their early activities, the political lethargy of the government towards their activities and how far they have come, helping us to understand and appreciate their activities though these activities may not be justifiable.

Another evidence of a devastated environment is portrayed when Habila introduces readers to the voice of traumatised parents in Chibok. Some of these parents have suffered physically, mentally, gone mad or despaired and died after the loss of their daughters. We are told at least eighteen (18) parents have died of stress and related illness like heart failure, stomach ulcers and hypertension since the kidnapping.<sup>41</sup> We are again introduced to a father who has disappeared and could not be found for days and is discovered a few days later, wandering in the hills, shouting his daughters name; he has lost his mind.<sup>42</sup> These attest to the fact that there has been a violation on the environment, the consequence of which is the disrupting of the flow of life.

The narration is made more real when Habila meets with the mother of a victim, a pastor whose two nieces were taken, three of the escaped girls and the son of a chief Imam. These different personalities offer a chilling account of the kidnapping:

We heard the gun shots ... at that moment suddenly all the strength left my body and I felt weak. I saw my husband's brother coming, he said they have taken all the girls. I started screaming and felt as if my life would come out... For two weeks I couldn't eat or sleep, I'd put food in my mouth and then throw it out again.<sup>43</sup>

Around 10 pm, I heard pa-pa-pa-pa, gunshots. I woke up the kids and we run out of town and hid behind the bible school.... The children couldn't sleep because the soldiers were randomly firing gunshots every night to warn off the insurgents.<sup>44</sup>

They took away our cell phones... They said they were there to protect us from Boko Haram who were attacking the town. Then some of them started saying 'Allahu Akbar' ... They were Boko Haram... They called us kafirai (infidels) and said we ought to be married... We run for hours.<sup>45</sup> This dreadful and unsafe environment described in violent and graphic spectacle reflects the ease with which the insurgents violate nature and destroy the environment. Again, the narration spreads the pain and sorrow of the reader, immersing the reader in the sights of what is being described.

Habila's style of storytelling, allowing the victims to tell their own story in what resonates a dialogue between the characters and the reader is amazing. This technique allows the characters talk to the reader, involving the reader and seeing the reader as a participant in their plight. Everything which is said and expressed is then located outside the "soul" of the speaker and, thus, ceases to only belong to him because "the author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener also has his rights."<sup>46</sup> Nature/the environment becomes a mirror of the human mind as we, readers, are invited to listen to the person telling the story rather than listen to the story teller directly.<sup>47</sup> We thus see nature/ the environment stripped of its natural state and is left in a chaotic one. This brings the immediacy of the action to the readers and engulfs the reader in the environment that Habila prepares for us. We are thus prepared to share with the parents, the psychological weight of assuming one's child is dead. Through this technique, Habila does not only hope to keep us crying, but to also energises us to be part of a path that leads to the end of this callous act.

<sup>40</sup> D. Cook, The rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria. *CTC Sentinel*, [online] 4(9), (2011), Available at: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-rise-of-boko-haram-in-nigeria> [Accessed 5 May 2017]

<sup>41</sup> Habila, *The Chibok Girls*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>46</sup> Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, (Texas: University of Texas Press Slavic Series, 1986), 122.

<sup>47</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP Print, 2007), 125.

The terror of the insurgency is further recorded by how a Chief Imam of Chibok and his family became victims. That was their third coming... I told her ‘you start running towards Mife. I will go to the well and gather the children’ .... I went on my bike to the well, but no one was there.

The children weren’t there. Only shoes and jerry can and buckets strewn all over the place.<sup>48</sup>

This narrative symbolises the metaphoric “moment of a radical eclipse of Nature”,<sup>49</sup> bringing all human activities to a halt because individuals live in fear, are psychologically unstable and families torn apart. The narrative is so gripping that readers are knee-deep in it, not just listening but as embedded participants in this eclipsed environment. This is also a clear sign of shameful failings of the state’s duty towards its citizens. Thus the state could not help improve the economic lives of the people making them susceptible to deceit by unscrupulous groups. Upon the outbreak of the insurgency too, the state is still unable to protect the people against the violence unleashed by Boko Haram. Thus political leaders are as guilty as the terrorists in this whole saga. It is worthy to note that the terror of the insurgency is recorded without religious bias. The son of the chief imam articulates this view:

The only thing it is ok to kill are animals and only for food. If you are not going to eat it, don’t kill it. How can you kill a man who is just like you with hands and feet and life just like yours ... how can you question his existence, and even kill him.... This is just a sect with its own doctrine and its own way of thinking, but it is not Islam.<sup>50</sup>

Habila attempts, through this comment, to ward off the misconception that this is a religious war. It therefore calls for a secular analysis of the events in the narrative; not a religious one.

A further indication of the lives of the people being intertwined with the environment is seen in the displacement of the people after the terrorists’ attack. The environment, after the insurgency, created a huge refugee crisis which Habila calls “a problem for the future”.<sup>51</sup> Three million people have been displaced from their homes and means of livelihood. Gombe and Maiduguri States among others were created for such people. In Maiduguri, conditions in refugee camps are appalling: “in one of the camps, half of the classrooms had been transformed into living quarters for the refugees while the other half was still used for lessons. So the refugees went about their daily business in the full glare of the students”.<sup>52</sup> There are also, “orphans, wandering about after the terrorists killed their parents, widows and women who, having spent time as Boko Haram ‘wives’ suffer social stigma and as a result could not go back to their families”.<sup>53</sup> As if that is not enough, there are constant threats from Boko Haram infiltrates even in the camps. The foregoing narrative depicts an environmental disaster because the environment controls the lives of the people. Thus normal economic, agricultural, social and even educational activities cannot go on while there are kidnappings, killings and shootings going on by Boko Haram. The existing inadequate infrastructure is further damaged due to the bombings and fighting going on. The vicissitudes of the environment have therefore, wrecked the economic fortunes of the people most of whom have run from the cities to seek refuge in the rural areas. Ironically, Boko Haram have chased them from the village again forcing them to seek refuge in these camps. Their insecure situation is quite pathetic and sprouts pity in the reader. We are as helpless as the victims themselves and we are thus ready to fall into the emotional trap that Habila lays for us. For most of these people, the future holds little promise in the midst of this environmental issue. We again observe that because of the extent of psychological damage caused, the people are not prepared to accept returnees and their offspring because they are seen as “potential terrorists”.

In addition, travelling has become difficult after the attack because the relationship between nature and society has been disturbed by Boko Haram activities.

Travelling was still very hard towards southern Maiduguri, towards Sambisa Forest. We could go through Damboa, which is like one hour away from Chibok, but we had to go round to Yobe, ...it was right on the bridge of the Sambisa forest where Boko Haram was making its last stand, so cars could only travel with heavy military escort.<sup>54</sup>

This situation resonates a gloomy environment in Chibok which is symbolic of a collapsed environment that is unsafe for human habitat.

For Habila, post-colonial leaders are to blame for the violence and ecological situation in Chibok. He believes the invasion of a Federal Government College in the town of Buni Yadi, in Yobe State, on February 25, 2014, two months before the kidnap of the Chibok girls, where 59 boys were murdered in cold blood, was a rehearsal for the Chibok attack. Habila brings in this event to show the gross unconcern on the part of the Nigerian government for nature and its citizens. For Habila, Nigerian leaders are to blame for the poverty, violence, kidnapping and ecological situation

<sup>48</sup> Habila, *The Chibok Girls*, 98-100.

<sup>49</sup> William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth: The Prelude or Growth of A Poet’s Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 34.

<sup>50</sup> Habila, *The Chibok Girls*, 102.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 106..

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

in Chibok because he is of the view that if the government had shown serious ecological concerns after this attack, the kidnapping could have been annulled.

Habila again incorporates the Nigerian government's history, and the reactions of President Goodluck Jonathan's government into the story after the abduction to symbolise violence as a symptom of a dysfunctional system where people have no patience for or confidence in due process. He explains the Nigerian government's history of political assassinations, palace coups, and electoral thuggery in the midst of this harrowing narration. Habila expatiates on Nigeria's political disunity beginning from the Biafra war led by Gen Yakubu Gowon to the military take overs starting from Murtala Mohammed to Sani Abacha, as well as the creation of a dysfunctional system leading to hype in corruption and a decline in the economic performance of the country. Habila digresses into this history to help the reader know that "the people copy their rulers just as children copy their parents".<sup>55</sup> So even at lower levels, "students and the masses vent their frustration in religious violence, kidnappings and robberies".<sup>56</sup> This is because a dysfunctional system makes people hungry and encourages them to occasionally fight one another so the rich can go on looting the country. Habila adds that as the years go by, people seek answers in religion "but an irrational reliance on religion, instead of giving the people peace and comfort, only made them less tolerant and more desperate".<sup>57</sup>

By fusing this history into the narrative, we see the group as an effect of a symptom of decades of failed government ripening into social chaos and not a cause of the problem.<sup>58</sup> Habila attempts to explain deftly the possible reasons for the conscription of people into the Boko Haram group. For many men and women who have no prospect of getting a job due to bad governance, poverty, little or no education and other factors, becoming a pious member of the religious community presents itself as one of the available choices. This is because becoming part of the religious community gives the possibility of learning in classical Arabic. This enables a person to provide Islamic services, as well as earn respect within the community and the chance of getting a wife.<sup>59</sup> Again, in this instance, we are made to experience a different environment contaminated with danger as we are given the history of Boko Haram.

Habila again explains the political inactivity after the girls were taken and blames the leaders for the violence and ecological situation. This is evidenced in the indifference on the part of President Goodluck Jonathan and his Ministers. We are presented with how President Goodluck Jonathan promised to visit the parents after pressure from local and international media and how he cancelled the visit saying it was unnecessary. We are also informed about the false claim by a top Nigerian military spokesperson that all 129 girls had been rescued and the diversion of millions of dollars budgeted for purchasing weapons and helicopters for the fight against terror to party officials by Jonathan's National Security Advisor, Sambo Dasuki. Ironically, it is the same advisor who called soldiers cowards when they complained about the lack of ammunition for the fight (p78), the skimming of over 1.5 million dollars every month by Alex Sabundu from his men's salary and the misappropriation of 40 million dollars by former aide to Jonathan, Hassan Tukur for negotiation for the release of the girls. This satellite story allows readers to enter the imagination of the politician, rather than simply experiencing their thoughts. What is relevant here is the unmasking of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims coupled with the unveiling of the other side of the politician organised solely on the basis of "laughter directed at all and everyone".<sup>60</sup> Habila mocks at corrupt politicians and other prominent leaders of society.

The corruption and indifference expresses the viewpoint of the post-colonial African as a whole and not just the politician. Through this technique, we see the place of the citizen in the thoughts of the politician. We are able to have an informed and impartial perception of politicians through this revelation. The wry humour in these statements shows the extent to which the politicians have reduced this serious Boko Haram issue to a fun game causing readers anger to rise to explosive levels. All these descriptive techniques are meant to cause a phenomenal transformation that would awaken our conscience, especially that of Nigerians to the gravity of the situation on man and our environment. The problem demands our ecological and cultural attention.

Sadly, five years after the abduction of the 276 girls, 103 have been released following negotiations between the government and the insurgents, while 112 are still missing. Shamefully, President Buhari has declared the insurgents "technically defeated".<sup>61</sup> He degraded them "to no more than desperate criminal gangs",<sup>62</sup> and their operations reduced

<sup>55</sup> Habila, *The Chibok Girls*, 111.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>58</sup> Chris Ngwodo, Chris. Understanding Boko Haram: A Theology of Chaos. [online] Revolution By Other Means. Available at: <https://chrisngwodo.blogspot.com/2010/10/understanding-boko-haram-theology-of.html>, October 6, 2010, accessed on 19th April 2020

<sup>59</sup> M.Last, The pattern of dissent: Boko Haram in Nigeria 2009. [online], 2009, Available at: [http://www.humanities.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/news/Murray\\_Last.pdf](http://www.humanities.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/news/Murray_Last.pdf) [Accessed 4 May 2017].

<sup>60</sup> Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl E. and Holquist M..Austin, (University of Texas Press, 1970), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Muhammadu Buhari, Muhammadu. "Boko Haram Technically Defeated – Buhari", *Punch*, February.6, 2016, <https://punchng.com/boko-haram-technically-defeated-buhari-insists/>, accessed on 19th April, 2020..

<sup>62</sup> Muhammadu Buhari. "Dapchi Abduction, Rann Attack Won't Happen Again, Says Buhari", *The Nation*, March 7, 2018, <https://thenationonlineng.net/dapchi-rann-attack-wont-happen-says-buhari/>, accessed on 19th April, 2020.

to “the last kicks of a dying horse”.<sup>63</sup> Shortly after his November 27, 2017 declaration, on February 19 2018, Boko Haram seized 113 girls and one boy from the Government Girls’ Secondary and Technical College, Dapchi in north east Nigeria. One hundred and seven (107) of them were released, five (5) died and one is still a captive. This points to a huge ecological terror crisis staring man in the face. The perceived threat of ecological terrorism has now become a major concern to man, shifting focus in the process, and expanding the scale of imagined eco-terrorism in the present century than it was even during the colonial period.

## CONCLUSION

The study analysed the environmental issues that are raised in Habila’s novel by using the theory of ecocriticism. The study found that Habila portrays the gradual destruction of a relatively stable country by political leaders and Boko Haram which has resulted in man and the environment being pushed to a margin of destruction. This, he is able to do this through the interaction between the environment and man, men among men as well as history in the novel. As a result, even if the girls return, Chibok in particular, and Nigeria in general is not ready to take them in since the environment is not safe and the people are not psychologically stable to receive them. The study concludes that, our environment demands our ecological, economic and cultural attention because terrorism imposes a destructive influence on human life and the environment in general. Terrorism is also linked with corruption as corruption breeds inefficiency within governments leading to unfair distribution of wealth and resources that leaves majority of the people poor. These are conditions that render the vulnerable susceptible to all kinds of manipulation by unscrupulous groups. The study opines that African governments in particular and humanity in general have to redouble efforts to ensure a fair distribution of resources and development of the economic lives of the people in order to fight terrorism and pursue a negotiated end to the crisis at hand. There is a direct link between corruption, bad governance, palace coups, terrorism and ecophobia and governments must realise it.

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<sup>63</sup> Muhammadu Buhari, Muhammadu. “B/Haram Bombings Last Kicks of Dying Horse – Buhari”, *Daily Trust*, Nov.27,2017, <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/b-haram-bombings-last-kicks-of-dying-horse-buhari.html>, accessed on 19th April, 2020

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