



THE TROPE OF DISABILITY IN JUDE DIBIA'S *UNBRIDLED* AND HELON  
HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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**Abstract**

This study examines the trope of disability in Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) as a metaphorical construct for systemic oppression, identity collapse, and socio-environmental degradation in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Moving beyond physical impairment, it applies disability studies (Siebers, 2021), ecocriticism (Nixon, 2011), and postcolonial theory to reveal how cultural, racial, gender, and economic binaries produce structural disablement. In *Unbridled*, gendered and racial hierarchies silence and marginalise the female protagonist, while in *Oil on Water*, neo-colonial oil exploitation and state neglect inflict mass disablement on Niger Delta communities. Through close textual analysis, the research demonstrates that disability functions not as individual deficit but as a social and political condition shaped by power asymmetries. Both novels transform disablement into sites of resistance. Narrative voice in *Unbridled* and journalistic inquiry in *Oil on Water* challenge oppressive systems. The study contributes to interdisciplinary discourse by illuminating literature's role in critiquing environmental violence, identity-based exclusion, and the failure of postcolonial nationhood, while advocating for inclusive and sustainable social frameworks.

**Keywords:** disability trope, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, systemic oppression, gender

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## Introduction

In an attempt to theorize the concept of disability, scholars have identified three key paradigms: the traditional model, which views disability as a moral failing, divine punishment, or supernatural curse; the medical model, which treats it as a biological defect or illness requiring diagnosis, treatment, and cure; and the social model, which locates disability in societal barriers rather than individual impairment. Accordingly, each model offers a different perspective on the concept of disability. Mark Sherry, in line with the social model, describes disability as an identity. In this context, he asserts that “disability (like ‘race’, gender or religion) is not necessarily regarded as a bad thing. It is an identity, with both social and personal dimensions, which may be associated with feelings of community, solidarity and pride, or conversely, with feelings of difference, exclusion and shame” (24). He argues that a “disability” identity is not necessarily a medicalized identity; it could simply be an identity that is based on identifying as someone who navigates the world in a typical way, facing many attitudinal and physical barriers.

This paper investigates the concept of disability in the selected texts as a signifier or identity that amounts to social and individual collapse. The categories of race, gender, sex, sexuality, class, and ability on the basis of which bodies are “marked” bring the construct of binary thinking to the fore. For example, the male/female binary traditionally privileges the male pole while casting the female as lacking or deficient; similarly, the white/black binary positions whiteness as the norm and blackness as deviation. Although contemporary criticism recognises that gender is no longer strictly binary and offers a spectrum of identities, the patriarchal and colonial structures depicted in the selected novels continue to enforce rigid oppositions that disable those placed on the subordinate side.

Ato Quayson (2013) attempts a taxonomy of the representation of disability in the works of Samuel Beckett, Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, and J.M. Coetzee by emphasizing the dialectical interplay between unacknowledged social assumptions and the remainders of contingency as reflected in the body of the person with disability. Building on this approach, Sunday Joseph Ayodabo explores the trope of disability in selected Nigerian texts and its relationship with culturally constructed categories like race, gender, class, and sexuality. In relation to contemporary Nigerian fiction, the trope of disability is often examined with reference to physical defects in the representation of characters who strive to attain normalcy despite their physical deformity.

Douglas Baynton observes that “disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves and also for women and minority groups” and that “the concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them” (34).

## Statement of the Problem

Existing studies on disability in contemporary Nigerian fiction predominantly focus on the representation of characters with physical impairments. For instance, P-Ibrahim (2022) examines the representations and empowerment of characters with disabilities in selected Nigerian prose-works, adopting a literary sociological

approach to highlight physical and psychological forms of disability as tools for societal critique. Similarly, Okafor (2023) assesses media portrayals of disability in Nigeria, noting stereotypical depictions in narratives that marginalise physically disabled characters and limit their agency in literary and public discourses.

However, the metaphorical use of disability to justify discrimination against minority identities has received little or no attention. This paper therefore contributes to existing knowledge by exploring disability in Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* as a critical concept for understanding human identity in general, and by examining how racial, gender, sexual, and class differentiations constructed through social binaries lead to individual and social collapse.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of this paper is to analyse the trope of disability in contemporary Nigerian fiction beyond physical impairment. Specifically, the objectives are:

1. To examine disability as systemic limitations imposed on minority identities through social constructs.
2. To explore how social, political, and cultural structures generate disablement in non-physical forms.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it reinterprets disability in Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* not as mere physical deformity but as a powerful metaphorical construct. Disability here emerges from rigid cultural, social, and economic binaries male/female, black/white, rich/poor that institutionalise privilege and sustain oppression. The analysis shows how these binaries produce systemic disablement in contemporary Nigerian fiction and underlines the devastating effects of discrimination on minority identities. It contributes to disability studies, postcolonial criticism, and ecocriticism by exposing the connections between identity-based oppression and socio-environmental destruction, while demonstrating how literature serves as a vital platform for challenging power imbalances and promoting more inclusive portrayals of marginalised lives.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in close textual analysis and theoretical triangulation of ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and disability studies. The primary texts, Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), are selected purposively for their thematic engagement with environmental degradation, identity oppression, and systemic marginalisation in contemporary Nigerian contexts.

The analytical framework integrates:

1. Ecocriticism (Buell, 1995; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996) to examine human-nature relationships, resource exploitation, and ecological collapse.
2. Postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988) to interrogate binarism, hybridity, and power asymmetries in identity construction.

3. Disability studies (Siebers, 2011; Garland-Thomson, 1997) to reconceptualise disability as a social and metaphorical construct rather than a biomedical condition.

Data is derived from narrative content, character development, symbolism, dialogue, and setting descriptions. Key passages are subjected to thematic coding and discourse analysis to identify recurring motifs of disablement across physical, racial, gender, class, and ecological dimensions. Comparative analysis between the two novels highlights convergences and divergences in the deployment of the disability trope. The study maintains reflexivity by acknowledging the researcher's interpretive lens while grounding claims in textual evidence and established theory.

### **Theoretical Background**

The nonhuman world, uncreated by humans, defines the concept of nature that ecocritics seek to appreciate, explicate, and defend. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey G. Harpham define ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (108). Greg Garrard traces its formal emergence to Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), while Ann Dobie underscores its role in renewing awareness of human responsibility toward the nonhuman world (Dobie 112). Ecocriticism therefore stands in direct contrast to many traditional literary approaches. Whereas formalists, New Critics, and structuralists deliberately separate the text from the real world, ecocritics insist that the real world must remain the focal point. After all, criticism has a responsibility to defend the nonhuman realm the very backbone of human survival.

Ecocriticism offers a refreshing and enduring perspective on literary study by examining representations of nature that are often overlooked. Humans exist within nature's confines, and exploring this relationship lies at the heart of ecocritical practice (Oppermann and Iovino 456). In an era marked by severe ecological crises, air pollution, acid rain, global warming, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, ecocriticism serves as an essential tool for analysing how literary texts portray the environment. In doing so, literature can actively contribute to environmental awareness and preservation (Garrard 18–20). The implication is clear: ecocriticism holds strong and positive prospects for the future of literary criticism.

### **The Concept of Disability as a Trope**

A literary trope employs figurative language for artistic effect. Tropes and their classification were central to classical rhetoric and remain vital in modern criticism. Historical trope analysis identifies dominant figures of an era across literary and non-literary texts; in deconstruction, the term extends to recurring devices, motifs, or clichés. The trope of disability functions as a "narrative prosthesis" that sustains stories while revealing the social constructs that shape behaviour, attitudes, and life perspectives (Mitchell and Snyder 47–49).

This trope saturates Nigerian oral traditions. Folktales, myths, legends, and epics exploit disability's rhetorical power for didactic ends. L. Adeyemi argues that Yoruba folktales and the Ifa corpus abound with disabled figures, often medicalised,

patronised, criminalised, or dehumanized, a pattern echoed in Hausa narratives (112–14).

Disability as trope assesses limitations through normal/abnormal binaries. Lennard J. Davis notes its peripheral novelistic role; disabled protagonists rarely critique societal prejudice (Davis 98). In Zaynab Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* (1987), Nana Ali's physical impairment symbolises cultural barriers to female ambition, manifesting psychologically. Chioma Opara terms her "disabled by cultural inhibition" (572).

Disability reframes identity-based interactions. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls it a multivalent trope and perpetual otherness marker (Garland-Thomson 78). Jung defines it as a label consigning individual to oppressive categories (qtd. in Goodley 145). Metaphorically, it signifies race, gender, class, and societal marginalisation, shifting focus from individual deficit to differential treatment and the societal mechanisms that produce exclusion.

### **Disability in Nigerian Literature**

Scholars frequently examine physical disability in Nigerian fiction as a marker of broader marginalisation. Adeyemi analyses D. O. Fagunwa's disabled characters as "stereotyped... disabled first, human or fairy beings second" (115), thereby embedding perceptual doubt in representation. Oliver Kingsley identifies five recurring types in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* – the dwarf, the blind, the crooked drummer, the stammerer, and the mentally derailed – reflecting both authorial and societal attitudes toward deviation from the norm (89). This duality (negative stereotyping paired with occasional indispensability of the "disabled" figure) mirrors the binary social constructions of normal/abnormal and able/disabled, simultaneously reinforcing and quietly contesting the hegemony of normalcy.

Identity valuation in Nigerian literature extends across physical, social, cultural, economic, ethnic, and political registers. Sunday Joseph Ayodabo observes that "Nigeria's crippled state...is characterised by ethnic distrust, religious crises, poverty, corruption, low literacy, poor infrastructure, military incursions, and irresponsible leadership...These indices subjugate the masses, including the disabled" (8). Poverty, femininity, blackness, or minority ethnic status thus become metaphorical disablement, placing individuals on the subordinate side of rich/poor, male/female, majority/minority, and white/black binaries.

Moving away from the traditional medical model, disability studies through the social model reframes disability as a minority identity produced by disabling environments rather than by bodily defect (Siebers 4). Tobin Siebers insists that "disability is not a defect but a cultural minority identity" and a malleable category available for political and cultural change (4). This paper adopts Siebers's social-model framework to read disability in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* as a lens for understanding identity construction through race, gender, class, and (to a lesser extent) sexuality. In *Oil on Water*, class and ethnic minority status intersect with ecological destruction to produce mass disablement; in *Unbridled*, gendered silence and racial exclusion dominate, while the incest taboo indirectly touches on deviant sexuality as another axis of imposed "defectiveness."

### Review of Criticism

Critical reception of Habila's *Oil on Water* has largely centred on its socio-political and ecocritical dimensions. Margaret Busby describes it as "a detective novel with metaphorical depth" in which "the oil industry breeds corruption, violence, and ecological devastation in the Niger Delta...communities gain little from profits, fuelling conflict...while kidnappings proliferate." J. E. Akung and E. James link the novel's widespread kidnappings directly to oil-induced poverty, systemic corruption, and the resulting disillusionment among youth (112). Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Philip Aghoghovwia read the text as an indictment of "slow violence" (qtd. in Nixon 2) and neo-colonial resource extraction, while P. O. Aba emphasises its portrayal of the Niger Delta as a zone of total ecological and human collapse (85–87). These studies consistently highlight how state and corporate power disables entire communities through the majority/minority and rich/poor binaries.

Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* has been examined primarily through feminist and diasporic lenses. Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton praise its bold treatment of previously marginal themes of incest, sexual violence, and migration achieved through a female first-person narrative delivered in extended flashbacks (xi). Wendy Laura Belcher situates the novel within African feminist writing that exposes the intersection of patriarchal control and racial exclusion in both Nigeria and the West European diaspora. Shalini Puri and Chioma Opara further argue that Erika's eventual reclamation of voice transforms personal trauma into a powerful critique of gendered silencing and racial marginalisation (Opara 575–77). Although sexuality appears through the taboo of incest, critics agree that gender and race remain the primary axes along which structural disablement operates.

The present study builds on these readings but extends them by demonstrating that disability understood metaphorically through the social model functions as the unifying trope through which both novels expose the disabling effects of racial, gendered, economic, ethnic, and ecological power binaries in contemporary Nigerian experience.

### Race and Gender as Disability in Dibia's *Unbridled*

In Jude Dibia's *Unbridled*, race and gender function as intersecting forms of metaphorical disability, systematically denying the protagonist Erika agency, voice, and belonging. The novel opens with her defiant prologue declaration, "I have finally found my voice" (Dibia 1), a statement that only gains full meaning after the reader learns the extent of her silencing.

The male/female binary operates from childhood to position Erika on the perpetually subordinate, "disabled" side. Marked as "evil" because of the circumstances of her birth, she becomes the family scapegoat, which normalises her father's repeated rape. The patriarchal code is brutally enforced when her brother warns her, "it is not a woman's place to complain about her father" (167). This command transforms speech itself into a forbidden act; Erika is structurally muted, deprived of the fundamental human faculty of voicing harm. Womanhood, in this context, equals enforced silence, a classic form of gendered disablement.

Migration to London merely exchanges one disabling binary for another. The black/white binary now takes centre stage. When Siobhan discovers Erika's African origin, she spits, "You Africans should really stay back in Africa" (189). The phrase reduces Erika to an unwanted contaminant, rendering her racially "out of place" in the new environment. Migration, which was meant to offer escape and rebirth, becomes another layer of disablement: the black female body is again marked as defective and unwelcome.

Yet the narrative arc culminates in genuine rupture and liberation. After decades of accumulated oppression – incest, enforced silence, racial rejection – Erika finally speaks her story in its entirety. The act of narrating the novel itself is the explosion of freedom promised in the prologue. By seizing control of the narrative and publicly naming her abusers, Erika shatters the patriarchal gag order and transforms her imposed muteness into a weapon of exposure and self-assertion. The title, *Unbridled*, thus captures this precise moment: the formerly silenced, racially alienated woman breaks every restraint, converting structural disability into radical agency. As Iris Marion Young argues, "oppression and domination are two forms of disabling constraints" (48); Dibia's novel demonstrates how the deliberate reclamation of voice can dismantle those very constraints.

### **Mass Disablement in Habila's *Oil on Water***

Habila's *Oil on Water* conceptualises disablement not as a universal biomedical condition but as a context-specific outcome of socio-political structures (Barker and Murray 45–47). The novel frames colonial and post/neocolonial histories as processes of mass disablement, rendering entire communities structurally impaired. At independence, Nigeria emerged as a "disabled and crisis-ridden" state, plagued by underdevelopment and internal fractures (Rafiu and Adebayo 218).

*Oil on Water* vividly captures neo-colonial exploitation and the military's complicity in securing the Niger Delta for transnational corporate interests. The absence of ethno-nationalist cohesion leaves ethnic minorities particularly vulnerable. As Akung and James observe, The Niger Delta is minority...majorities exploit resources...causing degradation, pollution, lost occupations, and vices (112). This self/other binary institutionalises neglect, isolation, and marginalisation. Military presence, ostensibly for security, prioritises corporate oil operations over human welfare, spawning widespread despair, violence, and death.

As an ethnic-commitment text, the novel follows Rufus, a young journalist, on his investigation into the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, wife of a British oil engineer. Through Rufus's first-person narrative, Habila exposes the profound failure of nationhood: the Niger Delta people, owners of the land and its resources, are excluded from the national imaginary. The text chronicles their lived realities of disillusionment, displacement, sickness, scarcity, and deep-seated resentment.

Boma, Rufus's sister, embodies this systemic disablement on a personal level. Scarred by five separate fire outbreaks caused by oil spills and pipeline explosions, she is reduced to an object of pity and retreats to the spiritually charged Irikefe Island, seeking refuge and ritual cleansing. Her abandonment by her husband John parallels

the government's neglect of the region's suffering; both reflect a broader pattern of institutional betrayal.

At its core, *Oil on Water* reflects the structural imbalances of Nigerian federalism. Revenue-generating regions like the Niger Delta are systematically marginalised while political elites conspire with foreign corporations to plunder ancestral lands. This deliberate neglect fosters national disunity and incoherence. Habila meticulously documents the twin crises of human and environmental degradation, alongside the forced displacement of communities long exploited and abandoned. Through this lens, disablement emerges not as individual affliction but as a collective condition imposed by power asymmetries, resource extraction, and the erosion of communal viability.

### Results of Disablement

Ecocriticism reveals the Niger Delta in Habila's *Oil on Water* as a site of systemic ecological and communal disablement. In Habila's novel, the operative binaries are human/nature, rich/poor, and majority/minority. Oil companies and the Nigerian state (corporate-military collusion) place themselves on the privileged side of each binary, treating the land and its people as expendable. The once life-giving river is now "black with oil" (Habila 23), disabling fishing, poisoning water, and destroying livelihoods. This ecological disablement mirrors the economic disablement of communities excluded from oil wealth and the political disablement of ethnic minorities abandoned by the nation-state.

In Jude Dibia's *Unbridled*, the dominant binaries are male/female and black/white. Erika is positioned on the subordinate, "disabled" side of both. The male/female binary enforces patriarchal silence: after years of paternal incest, her brother warns her that "it is not a woman's place to complain about her father" (Dibia 167). Womanhood itself becomes a structural muting, a form of gendered disablement. In London, the black/white binary compounds this trauma. Siobhan's racist outburst, "You Africans should really stay back in Africa" (189), renders Erika an unwanted outsider, turning migration from refuge into further disablement. Yet the novel ends with Erika reclaiming agency by narrating her own story: "I have finally found my voice" (Dibia 268). This act of testimony transforms her enforced silence (disability) into a powerful critique of patriarchal and racial oppression.

Both novels convert disablement into resistance. In *Oil on Water*, Rufus's journalistic pursuit despite threats, kidnappings, and the collapse of the environment around him turns his marginalised position into a vantage point for exposing truth. His persistence in writing the story of the polluted Delta and the kidnapped British woman transforms collective disablement into public indictment. Similarly, Erika's first-person narrative testimony in *Unbridled* breaks decades of imposed silence, converting personal disablement into an act of liberation and accusation.

Ecocritically, *Oil on Water* directly indicts anthropogenic ecological collapse, while *Unbridled* uses the violated female body as a metaphor for violated land. As Terry Eagleton argues, literature's critical function lies in interrogating all forms of degradation: natural, social, and identity-based (178–79). By placing characters and communities on the subordinate side of oppressive binaries, both novels reveal how

power structures actively produce disablement, yet also show how narrative agency, journalistic inquiry, and personal testimony can transform that disablement into sites of resistance and critique.

### Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that disability in contemporary Nigerian fiction transcends physical impairment to function as a multivalent trope for systemic oppression, identity formation, and socio-environmental collapse. Through close textual analysis of Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), disability emerges not as a biomedical condition but as a social, cultural, and political construct shaped by intersecting binaries: male/female, black/white, rich/poor, majority/minority. In *Unbridled*, Erika's journey from silenced victim of incest and patriarchal control to an agentive voice illustrates gendered and racial disablement as structural muting; her reclamation of speech dismantles the metaphorical "crutch" of dependency imposed on women in patriarchal societies (Baynton 52; Young 42-43). In *Oil on Water*, Habila portrays the Niger Delta as a landscape of ecological and communal disablement, where oil exploitation, military complicity, and federal neglect render entire populations structurally impaired. Boma's scarred body and the lifeless, oil-blackened river symbolise mass disablement induced by neo-colonial extraction and the slow violence of environmental degradation (Akung and James 112-15; Nixon 201-03).

Ecocriticism and postcolonial theory reveal the inseparability of environmental and human violation, while the social model of disability (Siebers 3-12) shifts the focus from personal deficit to societal barriers. Ultimately, both novels transform disability from deficiency into a critical lens for interrogating power, resistance, and survival: Rufus's journalism and Erika's first-person testimony serve as counter-discourses that challenge and reconfigure disabling systems. Literature thus becomes a vital instrument for exposing degradation and advocating justice, sustainability, and inclusive identity politics (Eagleton 208).

This research enriches disability studies, postcolonial criticism, and ecocriticism by showing how Nigerian fiction reconfigures disability as a metaphor for structural violence. Future scholarship may usefully extend this framework to digital narratives, comparative African contexts, or deeper intersections with queer and class-based disablement, thereby further illuminating identity, oppression, and resilience in postcolonial literary landscapes.

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