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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I hereby confirm that I am the original author of this thesis and that I have indicated any quotations and paraphrased passages. All sources have been acknowledged in the bibliographic references.

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1 Introduction

Journalism is often referred to as the fourth estate in a democratic system of government. Reporters critically investigate issues they deem to be of interest to the readership, thus providing the readers with the background knowledge needed to make informed political decisions. The investigative function of journlism is of particular interest in the African context for two reasons. Firstly, many states in Africa are notoriously corrupt and the judicial system is unable to hold the often wealthy and influential perpetrators to account. Secondly, Africa was and still is a target for colonialist enterprises on the side of developed countries and multinational corporations. African authors choose to use journalistic characters to shine a light on issues the local population faces. The thesis therefore analyses the role of journalism in three exemplary Anglo-African novels, focusing in particular on the function of journalism in the plot, how journalists are depicted and their role in the context of corruption in politics and business.

2 Journalism in Nigeria

2.1 News dissemination before European colonisation

Omu identifies a "certain historical continuity" (1) between today's media and traditional forms of communication in native West African societies. Although differing considerably in terms of method, the goals of pre-newspaper communication reveal similarities.

> The desire for information about local people and events, the satisfaction of news hunger stimulated by wars or rumours of war, the necessity to spread information about political and religious decision as well as threats to security, the need to stimulate and strengthen the sense of identification with values and objectives of society, the need to strengthen awareness of the authority structure and to generate and identify loyalty to those in power – all these were answered by the indigenous media forms. (Omu 1)

Omu distinguishes between "formal" and "informal transference media" (2). Informal types of news dissemination were often intertwined with social and business gatherings. Anything from family celebrations, local festivities and trade relations could provide an occasion for the exchange of current information, often in the form of gossip and circulation of rumours. One example of such occasion are the "moonlight gatherings". Omu (2) likens the role of storytellers during these gatherings to that of prototypical newswriters. While anyone attending such festivities was allowed to share their versions of popular "folk-tales", some narrators were more proficient and popular, with a keen sense of their listeners' concerns and preoccupations.

The role of markets was not limited to trade, but also served as a distribution centre for news from far away regions and cities – with caravans working as a conduit for information. Merchants would congregate in places of entertainment and commerce and gather information "on resources and prospects of trade" (Omu 3) as well as disseminate news and rumours.

The term "formal transference media" describes a more organised form of communication between officials and citizens. Omu (3) describes the "town crier" or "bell man" as the typical conveyor of public information in the Oyo empire, which was located in what is now North-Central Nigeria and Benin. "With his loud-sounding gong, he announced the promulgation of laws and regulations, meetings, arrangements for communal work and generally spread 'official' information in the community" (Omu 3).

2.2 Christianisation and the establishment of the printing press

West Africa had been exposed to Christianity ever since Portuguese traders landed in the 15th century, but it had not been a focus of Christian missionary work until the 19th century (Falola/Heaton 87). In 1807, slave trade was officially abolished in the British Empire, but the trade itself did not wane for several decades, due to continuous demand in North and South America (Falola/Heaton 80). At the dawn of the 19th century Christian missionaries flocked to West Africa – the main source of slaves for plantations in the colonies – to preach against slavery, to spread the gospel and 'enlighten' the African population (Falola/Heaton 89). The missionaries impacted today's Nigerian journalism in two major ways: They were the first to establish printing presses in West Africa and also their presence was conducive to the establishment of British colonial presence.

2.2.1 The Christian mission, printing press and education

The first printing presses in Nigeria were introduced by Christian missionaries, who sought to utilise them as a tool for religious conversion and education (Omu 6). Especially the cities along the coastline, foremost Lagos, were a focal point for educational efforts. A number of confessional schools were established in Lagos in the second half of the 19th century, leading to the establishment of a reading public, albeit very limited in size. Further inland, European missionaries often only found access to communities due to their role as educators. All over the West African coast, communities saw the benefit of Western-style education, as trade with Europeans intensified. Although especially protestant missionaries were familiar with various indigenous languages, the leaders of the native communities often insisted on English being the language of instruction in order to gain an advantage over their British trading partners (Lindenfeld 355).

European presence in West Africa also had an amalgamating effect on local communities. Contact with British traders between the 15th and 19th century led to the development of pidgin languages along the coast (Omu 5). With the expansion of their sphere of influence in the 19th century, British officials saw the need to establish English as a lingua franca. The establishment of the Sierra Leone Gazette in 1801 was one

manifestation of this long-term language policy goal, since it was intended to actively encourage the use of English as a common language.

The rationale behind the foundation of the Nigerian missionary press was as much educational as it was religious. According to Daramola, one of the most influential printing presses was established to “further educate [...] Nigerian converts who had been taught to read and write as a means of promoting the assimilation of religious information” (Daramola 13). Both the missionary press, as well as the press founded by the colonial administration helped establish an English-speaking readership in West Africa, which formed the base for future journalistic endeavours.

The newly established printing presses often included vocational schools for printers, which were also open to African natives. They laid the groundwork for the foundation of indigenous newspapers, which would report on politics from an African perspective.

The missionaries also helped provide access to European-style education. Coastal cities such as Lagos were among the first to establish Christian schools, which helped alphabetise the population.

The foundation of one of the first printing presses in Lagos in 1854 was also accompanied by the establishment of a school for printers, which provided vocational education for native Africans (Daramola 11).

The Christian owners of the printing presses intended to "increase the level of literacy” amongst the native population in order for them to “be able to acquire knowledge through reading” (Daramola 11). Daramola (13) states that indigenous Nigerian Christians were mainly “taught to read and write as a means of promoting the assimilation of religious information.” Despite these limited goals, Africans acquired printing techniques and adopted them to promote an African view on politics and society in the colonies.

2.2.2 The Christian mission and colonialism

The Christian missionaries of the 19th century played a key role in the establishment of British colonial rule in West Africa. The local elites' approach towards the missionaries was ambiguous. While, especially in the first half of the 19th century, they only allowed for restricted access to the communities, the second half saw a major change. With the growing power of the British Empire, local elites sought the support of the Empire and gain favour with its God (Falola/Heaton 89). The missionaries seemed to be an ideal intermediary in both cases. But the priority of the Christian missionaries was not to support local rulers in their fights against their neighbours. They were strongly influenced by the British humanitarian movement, which sought to abolish slavery, and whose ideology featured a strong sense of cultural superiority.

The missionaries did not rely on the local leaders to achieve their goals, but instead lobbied the British government, along with British traders, to establish a permanent presence in West Africa. According to Falola and Heaton (89) they believed that "British rule would result in the final removal of slavery" and help access hostile territories, such as the Islamic Sokoto Caliphate in the North and the Yoruba Kingdom of Ijebuland. They believed the indigenous leaders to be profiteers of the slave trade and therefore sought to subvert their power base.

2.3 Print media in the pre-colonial era

The first newspaper in Nigeria, the Iwe Irohin, was founded by the Anglican missionary Henry Townsend. It first appeared in 1859 in the city of Abeokuta, which was at that time part of the Egba Kingdom (Bourne 163). The Iwe Irohin was the first indigenous newspaper, with articles written by indigenous authors, who had been educated in Townsend's own printing school. It was published in the Yoruba language, and only years after its founding was it also published in English. The Iwe Ironhin was less focused on the spiritual life of the community and was therefore unlike other missionary papers, in that it had a clearly stated political interest. Daramola (13) reports that the paper also sought to "influence the traditional government they found in Egbaland, whose mode of operation did not conform to their idea of 'good' governance" (Daramola 13). He continues to state

that it “educated the growing public about the history and politics of the time” (Daramola 13) and bemoaned the persistence of slavery.

Omu (11) claims that the early West African press in general was highly political due to the exclusion of Crown Colonies from the political decision-making process. He further argues that the African press worked to create a “strong public opinion, which the colonial government could not easily disregard” (Omu 11). It can therefore be concluded that the Nigerian press was founded to challenge the colonial government.

This was also true for the relationship between the Iwe Irohin and the colonial administration. Governor Freeman interfered multiple times at the Colonial Office in London, accusing the paper of “aggravating problems of foreign policy” (Omu 8), which in turn led to political interference and an official reprimand by Townsend’s missionary organisation.

The Iwe Irohin had to close down in 1867 after an Egba riot against British encroachment. Omu (8) describes the legacy of the missionary press as giving “inspiration to African people who inherited the idea of the newspaper and came to employ it as the chief weapon by which they were to exercise their power of participation in the government of the land.” Similarly, the actions of the early press also influenced future government response to press scrutiny. Daramola (16) states that the antagonistic stance of the Iwe Irohin “led to attempts by the colonial administration to control and muzzle succeeding newspapers.” Daramola draws a straight line from the political battles of the early missionary newspapers to the critical stance of todays’ investigative press towards the government.

> [...] the Nigerian press, right from Iwe Irohin was founded as a nationalist, freedom-fighting press and an advocate of democracy. This is responsible for the psyche, mentality and the raison d’etre of the Nigerian press [...]. Right from its early days, the press was in conflict with the colonial government and that has remained the relationship even with indigenous government till date. (Daramola 16)

2.4 Independence, the First Republic and civil war

The economic outlook of Nigeria at the advent of its independence in 1960 was more than positive. The exploitation of natural resources, such as precious ores and palm oil, was promising a prosperous future to Africa’s most populous country. Additionally, in 1958 large crude oil deposits were found in the Niger delta (Falola/Heaton 158).

As a newly established state, Nigeria included a large number of peoples and tribes, which previously lived in separate states or state-like entities. After gaining independence, they found themselves in a federally organised state. Falola and Heaton (159) state that "access to power at the national level was to be derived from holding power at the regional level". These regions, on the other hand, were monopolised by the major ethnic groups – the Hausa and Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West and Igbo in the East. Less populous tribes and communities had thus become minorities in their own land, leading to a disintegrative effect. In addition to these inter-regional factors, cross-regional factors also came into play, as settlements of the dominant ethnic groups stretched into neighbouring regions, which were dominated by rival groups. Northerners vilified the southern minority in their region as a 'fifth column', which they claimed was undermining their rule and vice versa (Falola/Heaton 165).

The First Republic only existed for six years before its government was overthrown by a military coup. What followed was a civil war over the makeup of Nigeria, dubbed the "Biafran War", which lasted from 1967-70, cost between an estimated one to three million lives and displaced three million (Falola/Heaton 180). The military was to stay in power over the following 29 years, with only one period of civilian rule between 1979-83 (E. Ojo 828).

2.5 Interrelations between party politics and the media in Nigeria

There are strong historical ties between the nation's media and the political parties. While the first missionary papers on Nigerian soil have been established to spread literacy and the Christian faith, priorities changed when indigenous elites increasingly made their voices heard through their own publications (Omu 11). Because crown colonies were directly under the control of the government in London, indigenous people did not have the possibility to participate in the legislative process. African elites used newspapers as political instruments to rally public opinion behind them, thus effectively opposing the colonial administration and even successfully influencing the decision-making process in London.

Official political participation was only granted with the introduction of the Clifford Constitution of 1923, which established the elective principle in Nigeria (Falola/Heaton XV). Nigeria's first political party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party, was founded in the same year by indigenous journalists and political activists Thomas Horatio Jackson and Herbert Macaulay (Omu 51). It was with the support of the newspapers that they controlled politics in Lagos for the following 15 years. Political agitation and partiality, be it for or against a government, was and is an intrinsic part of the Nigerian media.

Aghamelu (158) argues that after independence, African leaders used media in much the same way that the colonial administration had done. He states that government media had been used during colonial times to propagate the position of the colonial administration, completely excluding critical voices and that during the political chaos of the First Republic the media was used in much the same way. Additionally, the post-independence media, as well as the political landscape, was divided along "ethnic and tribal lines" (Aghamelu 162), each working towards their own religious and ethnic goals. Aghamelu indirectly quotes research by Edogbo (33, qtd. in Aghamelu 162), arguing that political standpoints of media outlets are still determined by their proprietors' political stance.

2.6 Brown envelope journalism

Oyebode (36) describes the permeation of corruption on all societal levels, including institutions with the purpose to inform the public, such as journalism. He alleges that Nigerian government agencies "include inducements in their budgets for public events and tag it 'press public relations'", which are intended for bribing the press (Oyebode 36).

Oyebode (46) argues that Nigerian journalism is susceptible to bribery due to a chronic lack of funding. Even the low salaries that journalists are officially awarded, are often pocketed by publishers. Non-payment seems to be widespread, as newspaper owners have come to expect journalists to accept bribes, known as "brown envelopes", in order to make a living. Journalists, by accepting these bribes, implicitly agree to depict their client in a favourable light.

There is also financial pressure on news organisations not to cover corruption allegations of government officials. Such reports can also have a negative effect on

corporate advertisement, as advertisers may not be able to politically afford being seen funding a critical news outlet, out of fear for repercussions (bbc.com). Since the fall of the military regimes and the switch to a democratic system of governance, methods to silence criticism has not changed. Critical publishers are still exposed to fiscal pressure, seizure of property, random incarceration and physical threats (Oyebode 46).

2.7 Press freedom and censorship in Nigeria

2.7.1 Colonial rule

First attempts to suppress the freedom of the press can be traced back to colonial times. According to Omu (12) “Britain believed in government by discussion for herself” and granted its laws a “universal validity”. When it came to their application in a colonial context, Britain took a more autocratic stance. The British government “laid down no clear principles” (Omu 13) when it came to the execution of press law in the colonies, therefore the extent of the limitations that were put on the colonial administration depended on the individual Colonial Secretary. Generally speaking, the colonial context allowed for flexibility on the side of the colonial administration when it came to temporarily curtailing the freedom of the press or imprisonment of dissenting journalists.

In 1908 the indigenous Nigerian political activist and journalist Herbert Macaulay published a pamphlet in which he criticised the governor for what he considered land theft and corruption (Omu 182). Faced with these accusations, the government decided to pass the Seditious Offence Ordinance a few months later, which was based on similar laws passed in colonial India. It allowed for imprisonment of anyone who “excited hatred towards the government” (Omu 184) and was interpreted by the locals and by dissenting voices in the Colonial Office, as being a tool for press censorship.

In 1959, shortly before Nigeria officially claimed independence, the British introduced a Bill of Rights into the Nigerian constitution. It did not name the press specifically, but clearly referred to matters of freedom of speech and “peaceful assembly and association” (Seng/Hunt 87), which the succeeding government was legally bound to protect.

2.7.2 The First Republic

Nigeria's first indigenous government was already confronted with fierce criticism by the press over accusations of voter fraud and corruption. The government's reaction to press criticism was similar to the responses by the former colonial overlords. In 1962, two journalists were imprisoned because of their investigations into allegations of corruption related to local government officials. To silence them, the government charged and convicted the journalists in accordance with a wartime law against seditious libel (Seng/Hunt 88).

1962 saw the passing of the Official Secrets Act, which allowed the government to charge anyone who "obtains, reproduces or retains any classified matter which he is not authorised on behalf of the government to obtain [...]" (nlipw.com). Seng and Hunt (89) argue that such legislation gave the government "extremely broad discretion" as to what was to be considered classified and therefore anyone reporting on the inner workings of government was susceptible to prosecution.

The 1964 Newspaper Amendment Act is described by Seng and Hunt (89) as the "most controversial law passed during the First Republic". It made it illegal for anyone to publish "in any newspaper a statement [...], knowing or having reason to believe that the statement [...] was false" (Seng/Hunt 89). But not only the federal government passed laws designed to silence the press; such laws were also passed on state level, which led to closures of local newspapers due to their negative coverage of local governments.

2.7.3 Military Rule

The political chaos of the first republic cumulated in a military coup in 1966, which established military rule for decades to come. Smith (97) claims that Western tolerance for military rule in Nigeria only dwindled after the end of the Cold War, which ultimately allowed for a switch to democratic rule in 1999.

But military rule also enjoyed support from within the political system and the general population. Every coup d'état has been justified by the military by the "loss of legitimacy" and "venality" of the preceding administration, be it military or civilian (Smith 112).

But any promises of sustainable change were never backed up. The first military government immediately rescinded press censorship laws previously passed on local and

federal levels and passed legislation to protect the fiscal independence of newspaper publications. The government was overthrown by a counter-coup in the same year, which led to the establishment of the Supreme Military Council under the leadership of Yakubu Gowon (Falola/Heaton 174). Although he publicly touted his neutrality in political matters, he was not willing to tolerate a critical press. In 1967, the Supreme Military Council equipped the government with the "power to prohibit the circulation of any newspaper it felt was detrimental to the interests of the Federation" (Seng/Hunt 90).

2.7.4 Buhari regime, Abacha and civil society's response

Military, as well as civilian, administrations oversaw the fast growth of the oil sector in Nigeria from 1970s to 1983. The foundation for this expansion in the oil sector was based on the actions taken by the Gowon administration in response to the civil war (Falola/Heaton 182). The most valuable areas for exploitation are located in the Niger delta, which was part of the Biafra region that was fighting for independence during the civil war. The central government moved to implement the infrastructure for a rapid expansion immediately after the end of the civil war. Falola and Heaton (182) claim that 82% of government income derived from the oil industry by 1974.

Nigeria's ethnical groups have been vying over control of governmental institutions ever since its conception. The religious and ethnic makeup of Nigeria, combined with the destruction of traditional state structures during colonial times, advanced the establishment of the current clientele system. The significant influx in revenues from a single source of income enabled the ruling elites to establish a repressive system, which allows the parties in power to violently suppress dissent. The increase in oil revenue in the 1970s was accompanied by a major surge in security spending. Hundreds of thousands of people were recruited to serve in the army and the police (Fayola/Heaton 183, 206). This was done on the one hand to buy the loyalty of the military class, and on the other hand to strengthen the repressive abilities of the state.

Fayola and Heaton (205) argue that the influx in corruption in turn led to an upsurge in journalistic reporting. Political parties founded their own journalistic outlets to promote party propaganda, while at the same time uncovering corrupt dealings of opposing politicians.

When General Muhammadu Buhari staged a coup against a short-lived civilian government in 1983, the justification was once again rampant corruption. The administration implemented a top-down strategy for battling corruption, called the “War against Indiscipline”. While Smith maintains, that the policy focused mostly on ordinary citizens who committed petty offences and “did little to change the culture of corruption at the highest levels” (Smith 113), Fayola and Heaton claim that ex-politicians were successfully prosecuted, “imposing harsh penalties on corruption and criminal activities" (Fayola/Heaton 214).

What was new to this approach was the use of the internal intelligence service, the National Security Organisation. Buhari established a “police state” (Fayola/Heaton 214), which was used for systematic espionage on the general population as well as parts of the elites. Right from the onset of his administration he warned journalists about “accuracy” when it came to reporting on the government. When a few months after his taking power, the press accused him of having embezzled funds in his former role as Petroleum Minister in the 1970s, the security machinery began targeting journalists. The government passed Decree Number 4, which made it punishable by law to publish anything that could be considered bringing the military government into disrepute (Seng/Hunt 95). Any resisting journalists were threatened with indefinite detention and newspapers employing them risked forced closure (Seng/Hunt 97). Public dissent by student associations and unions was dealt with by force.The misuse of the security apparatus for political purposes found its highlight during the last military government, the Abacha administration. General Sani Abacha ruled the country from 1993 to 1998 and the most repressive press laws were passed under his administration. In the first year alone, four press decrees were passed, forcing media outlets critical of the government to go underground (Obijiofor, Murray, Singh 382).

To evade imprisonment, assassination attempts and physical harm various newspapers, such as Tell, The News or Tempo and even one radio station, Radio Kudarat, resorted to “guerrilla tactics” (Olukotun 317). In order to evade the security services, journalists worked in makeshift newsrooms, which could encompass anything from trucks to hotel lobbies and stadiums. These media outlets ran a campaign against a totalitarian state and sought to publish evidence undermining the government’s authority. For information gathering they also resorted to secretly taping government officials, or “gaining access to classified or confidential documents through disguised identities” (T. Ojo 348). Olukoun (318) defines guerrilla journalism as “the innovation of a robust civil

society keen to create communication outlets in the face of authoritarian closure". Adebanwi (49) states that the permanent conflict between the press and the government transformed the former into the most potent opposition institution against the ruling military. He further argues that resistance within civil society was based on reports of such papers. Olukotun (318) describes Nigeria's press as the "nation's social conscience". The radical approach of the guerrilla press allowed it to be independent of any political interference from opposition politicians or business interests.

Some of the guerrilla media was funded by Western governments and commercial interests, but they were ultimately successful due to wide-ranging support from civil society (Olukotun 326). Readers and civil rights groups backed the investigative work by providing hiding and additional funding.

3 Functions of journalism

3.1 Journalism's role in exposing corruption

The chosen novels feature two different settings where journalism plays a key role. While all three novels deal with corruption, *For the Mercy of Water* and *Oil on Water* are focused on the role that the foreign business operations have on the exploitation of natural resources, environmental destruction and corruption. The negative impact of multinational corporations on African politics, while not a theme at the centre of the narration in *Welcome to Lagos*, derives from the plot. The journalistic characters in the latter are focused on the question of domestic corruption and justice. The societies depicted in all three novels suffer under a self-dealing and corrupt elite, that has tilted the world of business and politics in their favour without scruples. Although these countries are formally independent, its elites are only puppets in an economic system that is neo-colonial in essence. The drivers of corruption and its main beneficiaries are located abroad, inflicting harm on societies that are distant and therefore out of sight. Journalists report on the symptoms of the decisions made in the overseas headquarters of multinational corporations, but fighting the syndrome is beyond their control. The corrupt behaviour of local government officials and the recklessness with which corporate employees endanger society and environment is a result of the decisions made by an international oligarchy that only has to answer to its board of directors and shareholders. Journalists report on the consequences of the companies acts and provide the victims of corruption with a voice in the companies' home countries, which are the source and beneficiaries of corruption.

But the novels also delve into how corrupt the local society is. The primacy of profit permeates every aspect of societal life and especially dominates the lives of the poor. In their effort to survive, they are forced to serve those whose policies brought harm on society. In *Oil on Water*, the dream of joining the middle class has the fishing communities in the Niger Delta sell their land to international oil companies, only to be forced to flee the poisoned land. The boys and men of the villages that suffer from the company's violence in *For the Mercy of Water* join its ranks and turn their guns against their former neighbours so that they can afford water and rent in the city. And although everyone in *Welcome to Lagos* seems to agree that Nigeria is a victim of its own greedy politicians, not even

insignificant traffic conductors can resist the temptation to harass those in need, even if they depend on their help.

3.2 Journalism as a last resort for opposition

The novels focus on characters that are more representative of the general population, rather than the elite. In *Welcome to Lagos*, a group of five outcasts fights to survive in the swirling megacity. Although they try to protect each other from harm, it is only by utter luck that they find safe accommodation and a somewhat steady income, which allows them to survive. Even though they detain the fugitive former Minister of Education, this only allows them to assume a temporary position of power, as long as they are in control of the embezzled funds. This small group of concerned citizens is restricted in their actions to the redistribution of the funds that have been stolen from the ministry, without being able to tackle the underlying issue of corruption. Although the Minister's claims concerning the internal workings of the government grow more outlandish with each interview he gives, the group hopes that the publication of his accusations lead to a public uprising against the ruling elite.

> If their leaders were as depraved as the Chief said, then perhaps this interview, broadcast around the world, would set off a larger chain of events. What could start a revolution in Nigeria? What obscenity would finally sweep the people out into the streets? (*Welcome* 251)

The quote implies that the Nigerian population has yielded to corruption. The Minister's accusations are too familiar a story to lead to civil unrest. Experience has taught the population that employing journalism as a means to provoke change is unlikely to lead to any results, but the frustration with the status quo is too high. Using journalism as a form of recourse is therefore an act of desperation. In *Welcome to Lagos*, the corrupt minister at the centre of the plot is not necessarily portrayed as a prototypical villain. In fact, in his past he successfully worked to promote education in the regional government of his home state, which is why he was offered the position on the federal level. His experiences as an insider led him to believe that the governmental system was beyond reform, and that corruption was too deeply rooted in the structures to be successfully removed. The group and the Minister are both tempted by the money, and both struggle with the seemingly overwhelming sense of injustice, but they ultimately come to different conclusions. While the Minister capitulates in the face of institutionalised corruption and

decides to enrich himself, his captors - although tempted to keep the money - choose a different approach. Publishing the accusations in the newspapers is their only option for justice.

3.3 Corruption, transparency and journalism

All three novels tackle the issue of grand corruption and its devastating impact on society. Although the government is generally perceived as being corrupt and reports concerning that issue regularly dominate the news headlines, the perpetrators are intent on keeping details hidden from the public eye. Corruption thrives in non-transparent environments. The longer a corrupt network stays hidden, the farther its roots reach. In *Welcome to Lagos*, the Minister is assassinated for his cooperation with the press, and the newspaper office of the local journalist who initially published the reports are set on fire. Similarly, in *For the Mercy of Water*, the water company has allocated significant funds to its internationally connected public relations department, whose purpose it is to mute any reports concerning the company's war over the water resources of the country. Investigative journalism shines a light on the wrongdoings of the powerful and is therefore depicted as being the natural opponent of the powerful and corrupt. In societies whose state structure is defunct and whose courts cannot offer justice any longer, journalists are the only ones who have the means to inform the population of the dealings of the elite.

3.4 Limitations of journalism

But journalism itself cannot deliver justice. Especially *Welcome to Lagos* promotes the fundamentally democratic understanding that the people is the sovereign and is therefore the only one who has the power and the responsibility to hold the powerful to account. The power of journalistic investigation has its limits. After Farida and Ahmed watch their anti-corruption reporting fail to produce any results, because it was drowned by reports of a royal wedding, Farida can only hope that civil society in Nigeria will stand up.

> 'Sometimes a story just sinks,' Farida had said, taking his hand. 'It's nobody's fault. All we can do is hope that some civil society groups will take up their cause in Nigeria.' (*Welcome* 319)

The reason journalism plays such a major role in the novels is because the plots are premised on a democratic understanding of governance. But while *Oil on Water* and *Welcome to Lagos* insinuate that the people could at least theoretically hold the corrupt to account, *For the Mercy of Water* takes a dystopian approach. The narrative around the conflict in the unnamed country is almost completely dominated by company propaganda. Its overwhelming financial power allows the water company to render the state and any of its bodies dysfunctional and to start a civil war to manifest its stranglehold on the nation's water reserves. Questions of accountability and morality are irrelevant in a society whose members are struggling to satisfy the basic human need for water. *For the Mercy of Water* depicts a failed state that has lost the fight against a private company intent on maximising its profit margins. Accountability has become an empty concept, because the population has lost all means to enforce its interests. The company is only concerned about press coverage, since journalists have the means to inform the population in its home country. Journalism's relevance in the novels is therefore inextricably linked to the agency the population has within a system of governance.

Each of the three novels also reflect the economic framework by which journalism is restrained. A free and unrestricted flow of information is vital to the functioning of a democratic society, but major economic and political stakeholders are in the position to constrain it through financial means. In both *Welcome to Lagos* and *Oil on Water* the journalists have to weigh their duty to inform the public against their own financial well-being. Ahmed's newspaper was already struggling before it featured the reports on the minister's accusations, but by scrutinising the government he risks lucrative government and business advertisements, which could force him into bankruptcy. And while Rufus and Zaq are not directly influenced by political interests, they both have to limit their journalistic endeavours to satisfy their editors, thereby opening themselves to self-censorship. In both cases the democratic duty to keep the public informed comes second due to financial pressure.

The question of fiscal stress reflects the defunding journalism currently faces worldwide. What is supposed to be the fourth estate in a democratic system of government that holds the legislature, the executive and the judicial branch to account in the name of the public, is exposed to economic stress, which makes it vulnerable to political and financial pressure. Journalism world-wide is in a financial crisis, with $40 billion annual

advertising income and tens of thousands of jobs lost in the United States alone (Williams 4731). Journalism is a tool vital to the functioning of a democratic system, but it is also a business and is therefore bound by the rules of the market. Particularly *For the Mercy of Water* demonstrates how the logic of the market favours those in power, allowing an affluent elite to solidify its political position by restricting the flow of information. The journalistic protagonists of the novels selflessly put themselves at great risk - physically and financially - to report the truth to their readers and enable them to make informed political decisions.

4 Reflections of South African history in the novels

The role of journalism in South African politics provides a background for its depiction in the Anglo-African novel in general. Although discriminatory policies were an essential part of South Africa since the colonial era, the apartheid system officially began in 1948. South Africa had fought alongside the British Empire in World War one and annexed the colonies of German South West Africa, what is today Namibia. Fascist ideas fell on fertile soil in the population and partially inspired the establishment of a racially segregated state. Sympathies with Germany survived two World Wars among parts of the population and the elites, parts of which had been educated at German universities (Trabold 56). Although the apartheid system of government was undemocratic, it was still different from totalitarian systems of government in Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany. Allusions to a rule of law were strong enough to allow journalists to circumvent the executive power through the judicial and legislative branch.

> In apartheid South Africa, courtrooms, which the government used to convict political opponents, were the same spaces opposition journalists used to acquire and publish information the censorship restrictions sought to suppress. Parliament, which was used for passing the statutes to create and enforce the architecture of apartheid, was the same site used to acquire and publish information embarrassing to the government. The Publications Appeal Board, created to enforce the Publications Act, which was used to ban literally thousands upon thousands of texts, was the same site opposition journalists used in the late 1980s to acquire and publish material that other sites within the apartheid government wanted to censor. (Trabold 57)

Particularly publications such as the Weekly Mail, New Nation and The Cape Times were amongst the ones who most staunchly opposed the apartheid government. Generally

speaking, there was a split between the Afrikaans media who backed the government, and English newspapers who for the most part opposed apartheid (Alhadeff 9).

Anti-apartheid activists and organisations were not only imprisoned, but also banned by law from being quoted or depicted in the newsmedia. This also included for example Nelson Mandela, and his party, the African National Congress. Aim of this legislation was to prohibit the spread of any political narratives that opposed the government line. Journalistic reporting therefore was the only political platform resistance voices had in the official media landscape.

> [...] the rule of law applied for whites in that the system respected what was said in parliament and what was said in court; i.e. speech in both forums was regarded as privileged and could therefore be freely reported. This meant that when activists were put on trial for attempting to overthrow the political system, we could report every word. [...] More routinely, when the handful of progressive MPs spoke in the parliament against the racist system, we could report every word. (Alhadeff 9)

This deeply political element of news reporting is reflected in the novels. A fight over dominance of the news and its narrative is also a political in essence. Opposition to the status quo can lead to political change, so it is only natural that those with stakes in the dominant political system have an interest in the suppression of any opposing narratives.

Violence against journalists is a recurring theme in the novels, and reflects the drastic measures some African regimes undertook to silence the opposition. Alhadeff (10) reports that the South African security police conducted unofficial executions. Public statements made by the government following media reports sometimes openly implied involvement in such murders. Newspaper reports about deaths in connection to police violence and torture could serve as a vehicle for public intimidation of opposition groups. One example of indirect acknowledgement of involvement in prisoner deaths was the 1977 case of political activist Steve Biko, who died in police custody. The Police Minister Jimmy Kruger publicly stated that "Biko's death leaves me cold" (qtd. in Wilson 141). State sanctioned attacks on political figures were a common practice and the perpetrators were shielded by South Africa's security laws.

> South Africa's security laws enabled policemen to be unaccountable. Protection of the most irresponsible policemen ensured that no court could condemn them. Beatings and other torture resulting in deaths were safely, symbiotically, locked into a protective conspiracy between police witnesses and the State. What happened in Room 619 happened countless times. The security laws allowed detainees to be held in terror without any protection. Doctors, magistrates and others were willing to compromise the integrity of their professions in the shadow of these laws, thus making the law a mockery but ensuring that it was played out as if it was not. Perjury was a matter of course. (Wilson 140, 141)

State sanctioned violence against political opponents and reporters is repeatedly referred to in the novels. *In Oil on Water* rebel prisoners are tortured by the Colonel, who is the official representative of the state in the Niger Delta. He is let loose on the population

of the Delta with only one goal: securing the pipeline network at all cost. The reality of political killings is also reflected in the assassination of Minister Sandayọ, following his revelations in the press. It is obvious who murdered him and why, and the public display of his severed head serves as a deterrent for those who consider following his example.

4.1 Truth as a way of healing – Commonalities between journalism and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In 1995, after the end of apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was installed to

> facilitate, initiate, and co-ordinate where necessary, inquiries into the nature, cause and extent of human rights violations in South Africa, spanning the period March 1960 (the commencement of the Sharpeville massacre) to May 1994 [...]. This body had the ubiquitous task of unearthing the 'hidden histories' of massacres, tortures, murders, rapes, abductions and forced removals. (Reddy 268)

The TRC had not the same goals as a court of law and was therefore not equipped with the same authorities. In fact, testifying before the TRC shielded perpetrators from prosecution. The goal of the commission was to uncover the truth about the many atrocities South Africa had suffered through during the apartheid years. The TRC was aimed at providing a way towards healing for a people scarred by violence and to "take South Africans into a 'peaceful' political order" (Reddy 268). Threatening the perpetrators with imprisonment possibly would have deterred them from revealing the details of the violent actions they had undertaken.

> [...] the TRC was not designed to prosecute but to identify the 'truth' leading to human riots [sic!, corr. presumably human rights; ann RS] violations. Though the TRC had a legal mandate to collect evidence, initiate hearings and make public disclosures, it had no legal recourse to prosecute. (Reddy 269)

Most importantly, the commission provided a platform to the victims of state sponsored violence and torture. Instead of being silenced, victims' testimonies were broadcast on national television, forcing supporters of the system to confront the atrocities that were carried out in their name. Similarly, journalism gives voice to those who suffer from injustice and violence.

5 Welcome to Lagos

5.1 The Author

Chibundu Onuzo was born in Nigeria in 1991 and grew up in the city of Lagos. She moved to London after secondary school to pursue further education. She holds degrees in History and Public Policy and is currently studying for her PHD at Kings College, London.

Onuzo wrote her first novel, *The Spider King's Daughter*, at the age of 17. In 2013 she won the Betty Trask Award for her first book (societyofauthors.org). Both *Welcome to Lagos* and *The Spider King's Daughter* are set in Lagos, to which she maintains a close relation. In a 2018 interview, she elaborated on the fact, that only leaving Lagos made her appreciate her home town (Bivan 2018). In his review on *Welcome to Lagos*, Helon Habila highlights that, while the African novel traditionally idealises the village and portrays the city as a source of evil, Onuzo's depiction of Lagos is almost romantic (Habila 2017). Onuzo herself describes Lagos as "not a place you can romanticise – even from afar" (Sethi 2017).

5.2 Plot

Welcome to Lagos tells the story of five Nigerians – with different backgrounds, but one thing in common: all of them are looking for a new life in Nigeria's largest city, Lagos.

The book begins with the story of the young army officer Chike and his subordinate Yẹmi, who desert the army after witnessing the brutal aggression against the local population in the Niger delta. During their escape through the jungle, they meet the rebel fighter Fineboy and the young orphan girl Isoken. Together with Oma, who is on the run from her abusive husband, they form a group in order to survive in the urban jungle of Lagos.

They find shelter in an abandoned underground apartment belonging to the former Minister of Education, Chief Rẹmi Sandayọ. One day, Chief Sandayọ returns to his hideout and finds the group of squatters. They realise he is a fugitive hiding from the police and decide to put him under house arrest. The Chief has ten million dollars on him, which he has stolen from the department of education. Instead of turning him in to the notoriously corrupt authorities, they decide to keep him detained and give the money to local schools. Sandayọ, who served a loathed and corrupt government, tries to justify the theft by claiming the amount he stole is derisory in comparison to the everyday corruption in the Capital Abuja. The group intends to expose the country's elites by making public any inside information Sandayọ claims to have on the government. It is for that purpose that they contact a minor investigative newspaper, the Nigerian Journal. But when Ahmed Bakare, who is the owner and lead editor of the newspaper, publishes Sandayọ's allegations, the editorial office falls prey to an incendiary attack and he is forced into exile. Ahmed flees to London, where he continues promoting the story and manages draw the BBC's attention. Sandayọ is finally arrested in a raid and assassinated by a group of unknown assailants. The group around Chike manages to escape the raid unscathed and settles in Lagos. Isoken is taken in by Ahmed's wealthy family and is given the chance to finish a higher education.

5.3 African agency in reporting

A key theme surrounding the discussion of journalism within the novel, is the question of agency. The reason Ahmed had founded the Nigerian Journal was to provide the local readership with a narrative from an African perspective.

> [...] the very principles that had propelled him to found this newspaper. Nigerian news, by Nigerian people, for Nigerian people. Telling our own stories, creating our narratives, emphasising our truths. (*Welcome* 39)

Ahmed's employees, however, do not share his enthusiasm. It is during a staff meeting concerning the newspaper's reporting on the rebel attacks in the Niger Delta, that his journalists' reluctance to do on-site reporting becomes apparent. While the staff feel their journalistic integrity undermined by their reliance on second hand information, they perceive the dangers of reporting in the Niger Delta to be too great. "They felt the shame of reporting what they had not seen, news of oil spills and militants, fleshed out from the dry summaries on Reuters. Yet shame was not enough to risk their lives" (*Welcome* 38).

Ahmed's political editor hints at the negative consequences that the lack of funding has on the safety of Nigerian journalists and, by extension, on the quality of their work.

> 'The men from BBC, CNN, any sign of trouble, they'll send a helicopter to fly them out, [...] Can you guarantee that? Can you afford it?
> 'I'll send you a speedboat.'
> 'With Rambo inside?' (*Welcome* 38)

But to Ahmed, the quality of the Western news reports is as questionable as their hidden agenda. He indirectly criticises the mix of superficiality and sensationalism, which seem to be latent in Western news reports on African politics. In part, it is their lack of expertise and conscientiousness, which motivates Ahmed to run a quality African newspaper.

> Surely, the militants would welcome him. They must grow tired of these white journalists who mistook their bravado for real menace, missing the irony of the stylised war paint, branding the movement something atavistic. Or they might use him as target practice. (*Welcome* 39)

5.4 Criticism of Western news reporting

The novel frequently criticises the way Africa is depicted in the media. The African journalists in the novel are aware of the prejudices reproduced by Western media outlets and therefore work to promote an African counter narrative. Ahmed is the main

representative of African journalism in the novel. In his opinion, the Western media's reporting on Africa is led by the prejudices of its audience. Stereotypical images of Africans are invoked to cater to the audience's prejudices, which it seeks to have confirmed. This results in a primarily negative and superficial depiction of Africa.

The image of Africa promoted by Western journalists in the novel is therefore similar to the one promoted by colonial-period Britain, which regarded the African nations as inferior, uncultivated and in need of Christian guidance. How the BBC is represented in the novel is of particular interest in this case, since it is the public broadcasting service of the former colonial power.

Ahmed's impression of the BBC headquarters in London is indicative of his critical stance towards the corporation. He describes the headquarter's architecture as "grand, pillared and faintly imperial, built for an age now politically incorrect" (*Welcome* 252). He also eyes the BBC employees in front of the building with suspicion. Upon approaching the entrance he wonders why they have not been "shooed off" (*Welcome* 252), before realising they are staff members. From the scene that presents itself to him he concludes that, "[i]f their listeners abroad could see them [the smoking staff; annotation added RS], perhaps they would sever this last tie with Britannia" (*Welcome* 252).

Depictions of Western journalists are frequently accompanied by allusions to colonialism. Richard Brown, for example, is a Lagos-based BBC correspondent and lives on the island of Ikoyi. This island used to be the segregated government district during the colonial period and only white Europeans and their black servants had access to it (*Welcome* 246). Furthermore, Brown has a black driver named Sunday. This could be interpreted as a reference to Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, in which the protagonist's servant is also named after a weekday, Friday. Although the afore- mentioned description indicates a neo-colonialist lifestyle, the journalist is depicted as being more open to African culture than his BBC colleagues. Contrary to the production teams working on news programs about Nigerian politics, he is permanently situated in the country on which he reports, speaks pidgin and knows when it is appropriate to suggest familiarity and when to withdraw into his white foreigner persona (*Welcome* 247).

Although the character's background indicates an affinity with African culture, Brown's journalistic agenda is similar to that of other BBC journalists depicted. During the pre-interview with Chief Sandayọ for the BBC show West Presents, Brown approaches the Chief with excessive politeness, in order to appeal to his ego and relax the interviewee (*Welcome* 249). Chike too, one of the Chief's captors, realises that the journalist "knew

something of Nigeria", and succeeds in making Sandayọ feel like a "big man" (*Welcome* 250). Western journalists in the novel share their focus on scandal reporting. In the course of the pre-interview, Brown reveals what his idea of a good story about African politics is.

> He switched the machine on, his eyes flicking often to its blinking red light to make sure Chief Sandayọ's accusations were being stored. Scandal, murder intrigue. Quintessential African politics. His bosses would be pleased. (*Welcome* 25)

The news production process is depicted as focusing on superficial sensationalism. Brown does not check any of Sandayọ's claims, instead he is pleased with the story that is presented to him and sends it to his superiors in London. The discussion among the production team of West Presents follows the same pattern. After they finished reviewing the final interview between West and Sandayọ, the production team starts to discuss possible interpretations and alternative ways of presenting the interview to the audience.

> 'We can't use this as it is. It's too...'
> 'Too much like propaganda for Remi Sandayọ.'
> 'People will be bored by an honest African politician.'
> 'Hardly honest.'
> 'He robbed the rich to educate the poor.'
> 'Nigeria's Robin Hood?'
> 'That's good. We could use that for follow-ups.' (*Welcome* 283)

As the novel unravels further, it becomes apparent that Sandayọ's intention had only been to enrich himself, before he was going to lose access to public funds. The production team is not concerned with any notions of 'reality' or 'truth'. Their discussion focuses around the best way to deliver the news to the audience and to make the biggest impact by appealing to the audience's prejudices. The novel criticises the dominance of commercial interests in Western media productions, which is diminishing their value for the African audience, which is directly affected.

The name of the format West Presents suggests that it can be seen as a representation of Western news reporting. Its presenter, David West, is described in the book more as a celebrity and showman than a reporter, with his show frowned upon by some of his journalist colleagues due to lack of journalistic professionalism (*Welcome* 257). When Ahmed and Farida, a university friend, discuss West's character, it can be understood as a comment on Western news.

> 'After one trip the man's an expert', Ahmed said when he was beside Farida again.
> 'Who, West? It's his job to be an expert.'
> 'Even to people from the country?'
> 'Especially to you.' (*Welcome* 285)

In every broadcast, West is presented as a subject matter expert on the topic at hand, but as is revealed during the character's introduction, he relies on his research team to

provide him with the information necessary for his interviews. At the same time, he holds his staff in low regard, claiming, that they must be “challenged in a way presently undetectable to modern science” (*Welcome* 255). Ahmed’s dislike of West’s conduct is relevant, since Ahmed laid the groundwork for the reporting. Not only was the Lagosian journalist the first to interview Sandayọ and break the story, but he also experienced repercussions for his work, while West did not. Ahmed had been forced to publish a “sloppy” interview, or leave without one and that’s why he is angered that “this pompous foreigner” finished the work he could not (*Welcome* 285). West received most of the praise, but was ultimately used by Sandayọ to conceal his criminal conduct. Ahmed’s questioning on the other hand almost led to the disruption of the interview, but got closer to the truth.

5.5 Media, politics and spin

Chief Sandayọ is the embodiment of the corrupt political elite in Nigeria. Although he is apprehended with the stolen money in his hands and also admits to stealing the funds, he manages to evade imprisonment. Sandayọ's achieves this by slandering other politicians and spreading gossip. Even though the group around Chike immediately apprehend the former minister, as Fineboy remembers Sandayọ and the accusations surrounding his disappearance from newsreports, he is able to evade the authorities for a long time.

Chief Sandayọ seems to thrive in an environment of corruption. Although the story initially focuses on the monetary benefits Sandayọ acquired through corrupt means, it is the all-encompassing corruption of society which allows him to flourish. Following his apprehension, he is quick to convince the group holding him that handing him over to the authorities is not in their best interest. The tarnished reputation of the police allows him to convince his captors that members of the police force would simply keep to themselves the money he had stolen (*Welcome* 146). Most importantly though, the group is also entangled in illegal conduct, as they are squatting in Sandayọ's underground flat and would have to face the repercussions, if they decided to call the police. In fact, his first reaction, before Fineboy reveals his background, is to put the group on the defensive and intimidate them by accusing them of trespassing (*Welcome* 134).

Although Ahmed succeeds in putting him at unease at first, Chief Sandayọ manages to use the media to distract from his own wrong-doing. During the first interview, Chike notices that the journalistic spotlight Ahmed shed on Sandayọ's actions, was the one thing that would be able to expose him.

> Only this Ahmed Bakare, suave and wealthy, could have drawn so defensive a response from Chief Sandayọ. They had incarcerated the Chief, seized his money, kept him under surveillance and yet every evening, Sandayọ sat on the sofa like a lord, giving orders to Oma and complaining about her food. Only one of Sandayọ's class could, with one innocent question, pierce straight to this pale, quivering ego. (*Welcome* 172)

The novel depicts journalism's sensationalist nature as one of its weaknesses. Ahmed neglects to follow up on the accusations made against the Chief, because he is too distracted by the rumours the Chief spreads concerning corruption among the governing elite. Additionally, the money about which he neglects to interrogate the Chief, and which would be proof of Sandayọ's crime, is hidden all around him at the site of the interview.

> The Chief cared what this journalist thought about him, cared enough to tarnish others' reputations, to offer what would have been an explanation in a humbler man. If only Ahmed had stuck to his first line of questioning, Chike thought. The money, Chief Sandayọ. The money. But he had been seduced by gossip. He was a journalist after all. Nothing more would be said of the money, hidden in parcels throughout the flat. (*Welcome* 175)

While Sandayọ used the first interview with Ahmed to distract from his own wrong-doing, in the consecutive interviews he switches to creating an elevated image of himself to the public. The Chief's accusations against the elite grow in severity from interview to interview to a point of ridicule. During the pre-interview with the BBC's Richard Brown, Sandayọ feeds the journalist wild conspiracy theories and even fantasies. The journalist eagerly records the accusations and even Chike seems to want to believe in a fabricated story, as long as it mars the government.

> The interview progressed much as it had done with Ahmed Bakare. Sandayọ shied away from questions of the stolen money, keen to focus on others' crimes. The Chief's accusations had grown even more fantastical. Human sacrifice. Blood covenants. All the macabre details of a Nollywood movie. A confection of lies or the truth? (*Welcome* 251)

The final interview, between Sandayọ and West, completes the metamorphosis of Sandayọ's public persona from corrupt politician to hero of the people. It is during that interview, that he passes off Isoken's idea of supporting schools with the stolen money as his own (*Welcome* 271).

It is noticeable that Sandayọ increasingly gains control over his depiction in the media. While the first interview is contested between himself and Ahmed, the second one is dominated by the Chief's narrative. During the third and last interview, which is conducted by David West, Sandayọ's control is not restricted to the content level, but

reaches even into the structure of the format. West's interview style, which he calls "back seat control", is the center piece of his TV show and is described as follows:

> [...] he opened with enquiries into childhood memories and musical tastes, moving in a constricting gyre, until he landed on the single question that upset his subject's equilibrium. A Middle Eastern dictator once said it was like discovering the passenger was the one driving. (*Welcome* 257)

Indicatively, moments before the interview is about to start, Brown, who sits in on the interview, warns West that "power might go out at any minute" (*Welcome* 267). Although West is described a seasoned journalist, Sandayọ effortlessly manages to upend his established approach, simply by interrupting him. The Chief's uncooperative stance forces West to restart the interview several times. It is only when the interviewee is satisfied with the questions asked, that West gets to conduct the interview. One can therefore conclude that Sandayọ has managed to gain complete control over his depiction in the media. West allows him to portray himself as a "patriot", who "speak[s] out against a corrupt government that is destroying this country" (*Welcome* 269). After watching the broadcast of the interview in Great Britain, Ahmed concludes that the "rascal ha[s] landed on his feet" (*Welcome* 286).

5.6 Journalism as a national conscience

As mentioned above, Remi Sandayọ takes control of the media narrative to promote a positive image of himself. Arguably, his main motive is deception, deflecting from his own wrongdoings. But starting with the first meeting between Ahmed and Sandayọ there is also an alternate motive emerging. Shortly before the first interview is published, the Chief provides insight into his background, revealing that, he too, had been an idealist in the past.

> He [Sandayọ ann. RS] had spent his forties railing against the government, shaking his fists at the authorities before crowds who never failed to respond with their own clenched anger. And now he had joined the ranks of those worthy of denouncing, or so the journalist seemed to imply with his questions. He had found himself trying to put whatever he was accused of in perspective, sharing Odukoya's gossip with the wide-eyed naïf claiming to be a reporter. (*Welcome* 180)

This excerpt reveals an idealist side of Sandayọ. In his past, the politician engaged in anti-corruption rhetoric, denouncing the corrupt dealings of the establishment. But after

joining the central government in Abuja, he too participated in the practices he had railed against as a local politician.

The attempted justification of his actions indicate that the character is aware of the amorality of his actions. Not only that, but he also indirectly chastises himself, by indirectly describing his illegal activities as "worthy" to be denounced (*Welcome* 180). Furthermore, it is bothersome to him that the journalist accuses him of corruption. While he openly admits to his stealing the money when confronted by Chike and the others, he tries to conceal his actions when interviewed by reporters. This indicates that Sandayọ has a sense of morality, despite his corrupt past, and it is appealed to by public exposure.

Sandayọ is also a widower and father of an estranged grown up son, Gbenga. Frequent reminiscence about his wife, Funkẹ, indicates that she was his moral compass and that it was her who kept him away from the notoriously corrupt Capital.

> If his wife were alive, he would never have taken this job. She hated Abuja with its sterile parks and lit-up avenues, wide freeways that led nowhere. And behind this ordered, meticulous cleanliness, the most unjust, most grotesque, most perverse of transactions. No, Funkẹ's puritan sensibilities would not have withstood the capital and he would not have come without her. (*Welcome* 63-64)

The Chief also claims that his wife's piousness had partially influenced his decision to go into local politics and change his community's situation for the better (*Welcome* 64). The above quote indicates that there had been a strong bond between the couple, even after their marriage had broken down. Although implying that he had not shared his wife's sense of morality initially, he had come to live by it as long as she lived. While he was being held in the underground apartment, we find out that it was his wife who insisted on their son completing a higher education abroad, keeping him away from the corrupting influence of Nigerian politics. They had sent Gbenga to the United States when he was only nine years old, which estranged father and son. While Funkẹ's influence on their family drove them apart and caused Sandayọ great pain, he also admits that it had been the right thing to do and that he was proud of what his son had become (*Welcome* 182). After his wife's death though, he joined in the ranks of those he had so vocally criticised in his early political life. The image of his late wife seems to be representative of his conscience. He claims that Funkẹ would have mocked his enjoyment of the "sycophancy" he had been met with in Abuja (*Welcome* 197), but all he had left of her then was the golden Rolex she had given him as a birthday present. In the absence of his wife's positive influence, Sandayọ turned into a cynic.

But Funkẹ's character is more than a representation of Sandayọ's conscience. While the Chief is depicted as a man who accepts and adapts to his surroundings, Funkẹ's

character is based on idealism and positivity. She loses trust in the goodness of life, when confronted with the impact of disasters beyond her control.

> Before her conversion, calamities upset his wife. She would cry at the aftermath of an earthquake, pipes wrenched out of the ground, homes collapsed with families inside. She was quiet for weeks after they drove past the body of a child, knocked over and dead by the time they swerved to avoid the corpse. (*Welcome* 199)

Her new religiosity allowed her to make sense of death and misery, interpreting them as signs of the coming apocalypse. However, she never adopted Sandayọ's cynical world view; she only learned to accept the world for what it was, but did not throw overboard her moral beliefs. Sandayọ describes Ahmed and his son Gbenga similarly. When Ahmed's office is burnt down and his secretary is feared missing in the wake of his news reporting, the Chief notices how detached they are from what he considers to be reality.

> Sandayọ almost felt sorry for this journalist, naïve enough to be shocked by brutality, a fact of life for most in this country. This was how his son, Gbenga, would be if he ever moved back to Nigeria, a bumbling, principled idiot. (*Welcome* 186)

Sandayọ's ascribes Funkẹ, Gbenga and Ahmed a shared sense of idealism, if not naiveté. His actions prior to his apprehension, as well as the quote above, paint Sandayọ as a realist or cynic. But throughout the novel, Sandayọ is aware of his wrongful actions, as the memories of his late wife have an admonishing effect.

After being imprisoned in his own hideout, Sandayọ is set on a path to reformation. Chike, Isoken, Oma, Yẹmi and Fineboy share a family unit Sandayọ has long lost. By forwarding the money to the schools it was initially meant for, they also adopt an approach that is the absolute opposite of Sandayọ's selfish theft. When Chike takes him to one of the schools they have supported, Sandayọ feels compelled to return to his idealist past.

> He could guess Chike's motives for taking him to the primary school. A change of heart: it was what do-gooders like Chike and his wife always wanted, proselytisers living for the next conversion high. And yet, knowing this, he was still pleased by the students, lined behind their new desks like rows of crops. (*Welcome* 198)

While sceptical at first, Sandayọ increasingly identifies with his role as a benefactor and supports Chike and the others in their cause. Although he is at all times aware of the deception, he would like to believe in it himself, showing a desire for change. Before the pre-interview with Brown, he indicates that he identifies with the group's cause and dramatically exaggerates his own involvement in their effort.

> '[...] We began with fixing the schools but what I will reveal might fix Nigeria. [...]' The Chief had almost convinced himself that his was a disinterested crusade against corruption. In this pre-interview, Sandayọ had a forthrightness, a rude directness that viewers would assume were the surface attributes of a guileless man. (*Welcome* 250)

Both interviews showed that Sandayọ cannot or will not publicly admit his wrongdoing. The first interview with Ahmed for the Nigerian Journal was dominated by deflections concerning the embezzlement of public funds. Facing the wide international audience of the BBC and David West, he portrays himself as a benefactor, to create a good public image of himself.

> 'I took it.'
> 'You admit you stole the money.'
> 'I took it but not for myself. I was tired of seeing projects we designed at the top never trickle down to the bottom. So I decided to become my own personal Ministry of Education, like I was in the days of the YPC. There are over ten schools that my team and I have fully equipped.'
> 'Your team?'
> 'Yes. I and a team of committed Nigerians who love this country and believe that she must be great again.' (*Welcome* 271)

Sandayọ ultimately manages to leave the flat with most of his money, his escape tolerated by Chike. In the car, driving away from the compound, he notices the police trucks arriving in front of the apartment. It is then that he hears his late wife's voice, urging him to return. Sandayọ turns himself in and bribes the police officers into releasing the others (*Welcome* 307). Sandayọ used the media to promote an idealised, palatable image of himself to the public. Taking into consideration his frequent reminiscing about his wife, who had promoted his moral side as long as she was alive, one can deduce that Sandayọ felt ashamed by his actions. The difference in public denial and private admission concerning his corrupt behaviour leads to the conclusion that the former Minister promoted what he saw as an idealised version of himself.

By including Sandayọ in the execution of the donation scheme, Chike exposed him to the kind of compassionate role model that the Chief had strived to be in the past. After his escape with the remaining funds, he decided to embrace this alter ego he himself had created, and sacrificed himself for the group's wellbeing (*Welcome* 307).

The novel embeds the Chief's death in a Christian narrative. Commenting on the Chief's funeral Chike recounts John 12:24 "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed", wondering "what new life would spring forth" from Sandayọ's death (*Welcome* 352). But the new life the Chief has brought was inspiration to others. The novel ends with the mention of a Nigerian philanthropist, an oil tycoon wanting to promote underprivileged schools. Considering that Sandayọ mentioned a connection between the Nigerian oil sector and political corruption (*Welcome* 174), it can be concluded that this anonymous magnate is likewise seeking redemption for his wrongdoings.

Although Chief Sandayọ has willingly handed himself in to the authorities, it is clear that he did not expect to die a martyr. Even after he bribed the policemen who had raided his home, he touted of his political connections, which he claimed were going to work in his favour (*Welcome* 310). Even shortly before his assassination, the Chief felt confident not to be in danger and be able to return to a normal life in his hometown (*Welcome* 341).

5.7 Journalism and wealth

Nigerian journalism is depicted as being financially vulnerable and therefore exposed to political pressure. This is the case for Ahmed's publication, the Nigerian Journal, which is under financial stress, due to its critical reporting. Ahmed tried to make his papers anti-corruption stance its main selling point, but its circulation does not reflect his efforts (*Welcome* 174). Also, no advertiser planning to keep doing business in Nigeria wants to be associated with an oppositional newspaper, in order not to draw the ire of those in power. The lack of advertisement money therefore kills critical reporting.

The Nigerian public is indifferent to his corruption reporting, as are those he criticises. They do not take his paper seriously enough to threaten with repercussions. After a newspaper report on his father's wealthy friend, Chief Momoh, he is sent a brown envelope, but instead of the bribes that are usually associated with this kind of envelope, it only contains a wedding invitation (*Welcome* 41).

But it is not entirely clear if the passivity of the powerful politicians towards his weekly pieces on corruption is founded on the paper's lack of influence or on his father's abundance thereof. Ahmed's family is defined by the dichotomy between his own journalistic ventures and his father's corrupt background. Ahmed's father, Bọla Bakare, had been Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum, which allowed him to build a fortune astride the corrupt system. These illegally obtained funds allowed the family to provide Ahmed with a Western education and the means to fund the Nigerian Journal (*Welcome* 188, 189). Father and son have a fraught relationship, based on the nature of the family's wealth. It was one of Ahmed's former fellow students, Farida, who got him engaged in politics and turn a critical eye towards the corruption in his native country (*Welcome* 211). It is the illicitly acquired wealth of his family that allows Ahmed to fund his journalistic endeavours, and it is the same funds which allowed him to escape the turmoil

after Sandayọ's allegations were published. While the headmasters of the schools receiving these funds were incarcerated following the BBC report, Ahmed could escape to his father's Kensington apartment, far from the government's reach.

In the end, Ahmed seems to abandon his lofty ideals concerning holding those in power accountable. During his flight to London it becomes clear that he regrets founding the newspaper and abandoning the privileged life provided by his father (*Welcome* 213). He had sought to highlight the wrongdoings of a corrupt government official, but instead his work is used to distort the truth and while he is exiled, Sandayọ is celebrated as a hero. The end of his career in journalism allows him and his father to reconcile their differences. Ultimately, he is again dependent on his father's illicit fortune, as he moves into the family's Kensington apartment. His parents are left to take care of the consequences of Ahmed's reporting as they take Chike and the others in, to prevent them from falling back into homelessness (*Welcome* 328).

The lack of international interest in the dealings of Nigeria's corrupt elites leaves Ahmed disillusioned. The newspaper coverage did not have any real consequences for Nigeria's corrupt elite and the coverage in the international media was pushed into the background by the engagement announcement of a member of the British royal family (*Welcome* 318).

5.8 Journalism as a public trial

Only moments after Chief Sandayọ enters the apartment, Fineboy reveals his identity and informs the others of the crimes the Chief is accused of. Chike spontaneously decides to conduct what he calls a "citizen's arrest" (*Welcome* 136). This decision puts the group in a dilemma. Not only do they not have the legal authority to make such an arrest, but Chike is asking himself what the appropriate way to proceed would be.

> And to perform a citizen's arrest, what did that signify? He had heard the phrase in university from a law student who joked they should perform one on their vice chancellor. Now they had arrested this chief, what would they do with him? Try him? Had he become a Benatari (Chike's and Yẹmi's former commanding officer; ann. RS), judge and jury? And what sentence? Death? (*Welcome* 138)

By arresting Sandayọ the group has adopted a role that is usually reserved to the executive power of the state. Chike thinks that they do not have the right to cast judgement on the Chief, which implies the relegation of that power towards somebody from the

outside. At the same time Oma convinces the others that they cannot rely on the justice system or the police.

> It's dangerous to have a politician here. [...] But if we take him to the police, there's a high chance the money will disappear. Maybe they will even arrest us too so nobody will know about it. (*Welcome* 146)

In the beginning Fineboy suggests keeping the money and sharing it among themselves. Even Chike, who is the self-proclaimed leader of the group, contemplates keeping the money. Isoken and Oma are the most conscientious of the group and it is them, who suggest offering the money directly to schools. Oma points out that even if they decide to keep the money, it would be of no use to any of them.

> Do you think any of us can escape with that money? You leave here carrying two million dollars in cash and what next? Do you have a bank account? Where will you spend it? Who's going to change it into naira for you? The first person that sees you with that money will kill you. (*Welcome* 155)

But the reason they have Ahmed interview the Chief is, because they feel that the corrupt elite must be brought to justice. Interestingly, it is Fineboy, the most morally ambiguous member of the group, who suggests contacting a newspaper. He feels that the deep-seated corruption of Nigerian society hinders his professional success and he sees Sandayọ as the embodiment of this system.

> If not for men like these, Fineboy knew he would be a star, his talent recognised, his diction, his rhythm, his flow, making room for him in the radio industry. But this was no country for his ability. (*Welcome* 135)

Although Chike is initially tempted by the money, he feels at the same time that it is tainted. The reason him and Yẹmi deserted the army and fled from the Delta was that they felt the army was morally corrupt. Their commanders forced them to conduct massacres among the civilian population. They had to follow their orders, even if it meant conducting war crimes, otherwise they themselves would have been executed by their superiors (*Welcome* 12). By being forced into conducting these massacres the soldiers also became victims of their superiors' corrupt conduct. The night the Chief is arrested by the group, Chike's commanding officer, Colonel Benatari, appears in his dream and orders him to take the money.

> The Colonel was standing in a river, submerged to his knees, a cutlass in his hand, hacking at the muddy surface. There was something in the water, something bleeding each time he struck. When the river was dyed red, Benatari straightened and held out the cutlass to him. 'Take the money.' (*Welcome* 137)

Sandayọ, the stolen money and the Colonel are all embodiments of - or associated with -corruption. If Chike would take the money for himself, he too would be tainted by it.

After asking Chike for permission Fineboy then contacts Ahmed to have him interview Chief Sandayọ.

The interview is reminiscent of a court hearing. Ahmed formally identifies Sandayọ, before he commences the interview and the questions he asks are direct and carefully formulated. But Isoken and Oma interject questions at the onset of the interview.

> 'Ask him,' Isoken said when the journalist was seated, 'ask him why my school which was built for five hundred students had over two thousand.'
> 'And while you're asking,' Oma said, 'in my own university lecturers used to force girls to sleep with them or else they will fail them. What did he do about that?'
> 'Please, you must let me ask the questions,' Ahmed said in an accent Chike recognised as elite [...] (*Welcome* 172)

The nature of the questions suggests that the women hold Sandayọ personally responsible for the desolate state of the educational system in Nigeria. It is also notable that they pose these questions only during Ahmed's interview. Chike specifically notes that "every evening, Sandayọ sat on the sofa like a lord, giving orders to Oma" (*Welcome* 172). While the group is responsible for Sandayọ's temporary incarceration, they decide to relegate the conduct of this unofficial trial to the journalist. Due to their lack of trust in the justice system the group decides that a public trial is the only alternative they have to hold Nigeria's corrupt elite to account.

6 Oil on Water

6.1 The Author

Helon Habila was born in 1967 in northern Nigeria. In a 2003 interview he described the Nigeria of his youth as being dominated by military dictatorship and their repressive policies. From a young age on, writing gave him an "avenue to express [him]self and to comment about justice and injustice" (Anonymous 2014). His opposition towards military rule and oppression shaped the author's youth.

Habila grew up in a middle-class family, which gave him the possibility to attend university. After two failed attempts at technical studies, Habila studied English and literature at the University of Jos in the late eighties to early nineties. He finished his studies in 1995, during the height of the Abacha regime, whose economic mismanagement and corruption left swaths of young and well educated Nigerians unemployed. This was also the time of the worst repression against opposition in Nigeria's history, with journalists and politicians facing imprisonment and execution. During that time, he was working as an assistant lecturer in English at the Federal Polytechnic in Bauchi. Only after the Abacha regime did he venture into journalism and worked as a writer for a "romance magazine called *Hints*" (Bures 2003) and then later as an arts editor for the *Vanguard*. All the while he wrote poems and short stories, which won him several national and international prizes in 2000 and led to international recognition. Many of his friends had been active journalists and critical writers during the Abacha rule, and he describes their experiences as inspiration to his works (Bures 2003).

6.2 Plot

Oil on Water is set in 2009, in a democratic phase of Nigeria. The two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, take on a deployment to the Niger Delta, where a British petroleum engineer wants them to obtain proof of his wife's wellbeing. She had been abducted by criminals in Port Harcourt and consequently fallen into the hands of anti-government militias, who moved her to their hideout in the Delta, demanding ransom for her release. Both journalists travel to a remote island as part of a larger media expedition, where they are supposed to meet a militia emissary and the hostage. The military ambushes the kidnappers before the encounter can take place, so all the journalists find is rubble and the corpses of dead militiamen. Two surviving members of the militia steal their boat at gunpoint, leaving the journalists stranded on the island. Pressed by the militia, the neighbouring religious community of Irikefe send the fisherman Tamuno and his ten-year-old son, Michael, to transport the journalists to their island and provide them with shelter. While Rufus and the other journalists return to Port Harcourt and publish their stories, Zaq stays behind. As he returns to Irikefe, Rufus joins Zaq in resuming their efforts to find the hostage and return with proof of life. The fisherman and his son become their guides through the Delta, showing them the despair of the local people, the desolation of nature, and the death brought upon the region by the conflict over crude oil and the revenues attached. Their observing role as journalists does not keep them safe from entanglement in the conflict. They are abducted and detained multiple times, by the military as well as the rebels. In the end, Rufus finds the hostage, only to witness her being abducted again. Zaq, weakened from years of alcohol abuse, succumbs to dengue fever and Rufus returns to Port Harcourt.

6.3 Reporting on environmental destruction

Although the story's main plot is focused on the abduction of the wife of a British petroleum engineer, Isabel Floode, the bulk of the narration is concerned with the effect the petroleum industry has on the Niger Delta. The story is told from the perspective of the protagonist, Rufus, who is a journalist and travels with his fallen idol, the veteran journalist Zaq, through the Delta. On their way through the Delta the two journalists are faced with three symptoms of the corrupting influence of the petroleum industry: environmental destruction, violence and displacement. The harmful influence of these companies is discussed indirectly through the depiction of the plights the local population has to suffer.

The oil companies' destructive influence is openly talked about in the conversation between Rufus and the doctor of the military camp where they have been temporarily detained. The doctor describes the situation from a medical perspective, underlining the negative impact the oil drilling has on the local population and also the lure of the money associated with it. Concerning his first employment in the area he explains, that

> [...] the village's chief discontent was not over their health [...]. One day an elder looked me in the face and said, I am not ill. I am just poor. Can you give me medicine for that? We want that fire that burns day and night. (*Oil* 152)

The fire the villager mentioned are the gas flares, which burn the by-product of the oil wells – gas whose refinement would be uneconomic. During his five-year deployment, the doctor witnessed the rapid expansion of gas flaring in the area and the accompanying rise of health hazards. Tempted by the financial incentives the oil companies promise, local villages allow drilling and flaring on their land. But the money, which is spent on entertainment and cars, quickly runs out, leaving the villages with poisoned air and soil. With the land that sustained them for centuries polluted, these communities are forced to move to the slums of the megacities to survive. The doctor himself had tried to warn the villagers of the pollution by showing them scientific measurements and data. But the villagers, blinded by greed, could not relate to the narration he provided and ignored his warnings. To the oil companies, on the other hand, that scientific way of narrating has meaning, and they offered him money to keep the data secret (*Oil* 153). The doctor's efforts to inform the country, and in fact the world, of what is going on in the Delta, are ignored. An NGO published his findings, to no avail and the central government seems to be only an extension of the oil industry, and therefore does not act. Although he is without hope for

change, he continues to inform communities of the dangers of flaring. The conversation between Rufus and the doctor results in an almost compulsive recounting of his experiences. Once the journalist has him engaged in the conversation, the doctor gives in to the need to pass on his experiences, and falls into a lengthy monologue.

The violence in the Delta is also a consequence of the oil companies' presence. Traditionally, the local communities lived off the land, depended on fishing, and subsistence farming to feed themselves. But the locals are trapped in a vicious circle in their search for income. On the one hand, the polluted waterways are hostile to fish, and therefore the natives resort to siphoning oil from pipelines in order to make a living. But this results in more spillage, which leads to further degradation of fishing grounds and arable land. Rufus' home village depended on such practices, as did his family. He suffered a childhood trauma, when an accident ignited a blaze, which consumed most of the village and led to the imprisonment of his father and his sister's maiming (*Oil* 3). This can be interpreted as one of the motives for his work as a journalist. The government answered to the endemic oil theft with the deployment of the army, which is charged with patrolling the waterways and protecting the oil industry's infrastructure. In order to defend their main source of income, parts of the local population formed rebel militias, which are now engaged in a violent conflict with the military. While the novel's depiction should not be seen as a political analysis of the armed incursions in the Niger Delta, it does comment on the underlying causes of this ongoing conflict.

The continuous violence and the desolation of the land is the cause of mass migration into the mega cities. During their attempt to find the British hostage, Rufus and Zaq are guided through the Delta by Tamuno, who leads them through the desolation left behind by the oil companies. They find a sequence of abandoned villages, apparently all sharing the same fate.

> - Who lives here?
> The old man shrugged. - Nobody.
> - Where did the people go?
> - Dem left because of too much fighting.
> The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village center like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete [...]. A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999. 15000 METERS. (*Oil* 8, 9)

After barely escaping a military raid on one of the few inhabited villages in that region, Tamuno takes Zaq and Rufus to his home village, which is led by his brother, Chieftain Ibrahim. Chieftain Ibrahim's village tried to resist the temptations of the oil companies, but was ultimately driven off its land. Although their society was tempted by

the material benefits that were promised to them, its then leader, Chief Malabo, also realised the incompatibility of their way of life with the oil companies' plans.

> They'd been born here, they'd grown up here, they were happy here, and though they may not be rich, the land had been good to them, they never lacked anything. What kind of custodians of the land would they be if they sold it off? And just look at the other villages that had taken the oil money; already the cars had broken down, and the cheap televisions and DVD players were all gone, and where was the rest of the money? Thrown away in Port Harcourt barrooms, or on second wives and funeral parties, and now they were worse off than before. (*Oil* 43)

What is described in the Chief's narration is the futility of resistance against international corporations and the national government. The revenue created by oil producing and refining companies allow the companies to take over branches of the government, including the army. As a last resort, the village tries to establish a local patrol unit, which is meant to deter the intruders, but a minor confrontation is enough to provide the oil companies with a reason to call for the support of the army. The Chieftain Malabo was detained by the army, tortured until he put his signature on a contract allowing the oil companies to establish wells on the village's land and subsequently murdered (*Oil* 44). The fate of the village is representative of the larger issue at hand. The general population is powerless in face of the overwhelming assets of multinational companies. Anyone who tries to resist the oil companies is labelled a rebel and targeted by the army. As a consequence, large parts of the native population are forced off their land and into the cities.

6.4 Journalists as chroniclers of social decay

Chief Ibrahim's village has lost its struggle against the influence of the oil companies, and due to widespread pollution along the coast, the village is continually moving towards the metropolis of Port Harcourt to sustain itself. The community is in a process of degradation, and Chief Ibrahim assumes that it will lose its social cohesion and cease to exist as a social entity once it settles in the metropolis (*Oil* 196). The villagers are powerless and, most likely, without a future as a community. Rufus and Zaq meet Chief Ibrahim and his village twice in the course of the novel, marking the rapid decay. Chief Ibrahim does not have much hope in finding a place for his community to thrive.

Michael and Tamuno, who are the journalists' guides, are also part of that community. As a boy of 10, Michael represents the community's immediate future, but both him and his father seem to be aware of the bleak outlook. Instead of remuneration for

guiding them through the Delta, the boy's father asks the journalists to take Michael into their service and provide him with a school education.

> He no get good future here. Na good boy, very sharp. He go help you and your wife with any work, [...] and you too you go send am go school. [...] wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that. (*Oil* 40)

The father sees the journalists as a means of escape for the boy from the Delta, but his hopes are misplaced. Neither Rufus nor Zaq see themselves in the position to support a child. The journalists in the novel cannot alleviate the pain and problems their interviewees are facing. And yet they are approached freely by anyone wanting to share their stories. Some of the characters who want to share their stories with the journalists face an uncertain future – as in the case of Chief Ibrahim's village. His motivation is unclear, as he does not draw an immediate benefit from the publication of his village's fate. The journalists in this case work as chroniclers of the village's demise. But Chief Ibrahim's story is characteristic of a whole region, whose way of life is irrevocably destroyed by the oil industry's impact. There are no indications as to how the situation could be positively influenced by media coverage.

In the case of the British hostage however, media coverage has significant weight. News stories on the abduction have an influence on the stock market, politics and international relations.

> Some oil companies had already stopped sending expatriate workers to the region, and were even thinking of shutting down their operations because the cost was becoming higher than they could bear, and this possibility was already causing a tension in the oil market, with prices expected to rise in the response. (*Oil* 101)

The novel therefore seems to criticise the bigotry in the media coverage. Swaths of land are deserted and its inhabitants displaced, without the international media noticing, but the abduction of a British citizen receives wide-ranging coverage.

Salomon and Chief Ibrahim have a similar motive for talking to the journalists. Salomon was Isabel Floode's driver during her brief stay in Nigeria. His fianceé, Koko, was having an affair with James Floode, Isabels husband, and left him to live with the British engineer. Isabel found out about the affair at about the same time as Salomon. When she decided not to return to the white enclave where her husband lived, Salomon helped her hide. It was then that a friend of his approached him and suggested holding her for ransom. The situation spun out of control and the hostage, as well as the kidnappers were captured by the rebels. Salomon himself being in the hands of the rebels, decides to attempt an escape from the rebel base with Isabel. They are recaptured while they are

travelling to Lagos on Chief Ibrahim's caravan. Coincidentally, Rufus is with them during the attack and he volunteers to serve as a hostage in Michael's place (*Oil* 208). During their incarceration at the rebel base, Rufus approaches Salomon and tries to elicit an interview. Salomon refuses at first. He expects his execution by the rebels for his involvement in the flight of Isabel. It is for that reason that he sees no point in telling Rufus his story. While all other interview partners approach Rufus and Zaq for an interview, Salomon is the only one who needs convincing. At first Rufus suggests that the publicity journalism can provide would make him safe.

> - Once I have your story, they wouldn't dare do anything to you, because they know when I go out there I will print it, and the world will know you are here, kept against your will...
> - Nonsense. [...] These people, they no care. They have killed before, and I know nothing is going to save me... nothing... The Professor is a madman. I have seen what he can do. A few days ago [...] he shot a man over there. Point-blank. (*Oil* 216)

Salomon's experiences are a comment on the vulnerability of the native African population. While the prospect of money and publicity that are connected with abducting a white British citizen keep Isabel safe, the same does not apply to her black African driver. Salomon agrees to cooperate, when Rufus tells him that he is the police's prime suspect.

> - [...] The police have everyone thinking you're some kind of crazy kidnapper --- don't you want to put the record straight? This might be your only chance, you know. Don't you want your family and friends to know the truth, the real truth? [...]
> - I didn't kidnap her... [...]
> I saw his eyes darken with anger, and he started to rock himself back and forth, [...] his arms wrapped tightly around his knees. (*Oil* 216, 217)

Salomon has no direct benefit from sharing his story with Rufus. He ultimately does not survive his detention and he is aware of his impending death when he meets Rufus. Salomon is resigned to his fate and does not even draw an emotional benefit from talking to the journalist. Two things convince him to share his story. Firstly, the possibility to at least indirectly tell his family and friends what really transpired: Salomon wants to be kept in good memory by his loved ones, and not be remembered as a common criminal and the interview is his only chance to rectify his image. Secondly, he wants to share the story of his betrayal by his fiancée. When he starts to talk about it, his emotions immediately come to the surface. He uses his last chance to communicate with the outside world to tell of his betrayal by Koko and James, both of whom he trusted.

What Chief Ibrahim and Salomon share is the desire to create a record of their story in what limited time they have left. Chief Ibrahim's village does not face death in the same way Salomon does. It will most likely cease to exist as an entity, with its villagers dispersing in the metropolis. But it also faces death in a literal sense, as its old Chieftain

has been murdered. The village is confronted with the prospective obliteration of its community, while Salomon deals with death on an individual level. What both share is the desire for others to know about their fate and it is for that purpose that they seek the journalists' help. Salomon reveals his inner thoughts when he explains to Rufus that he shares his experience, “because some of us might not live to see another sunset like this one” (*Oil* 219)

6.5 Journalists as witness

Throughout the novel, journalists are limited in their actions to witnessing and reporting on the injustices they encounter. During their detention in the military camp, Rufus and Zaq become witnesses to torture and military terror against innocent civilians. When the commander of the military forces in the Delta tortures his prisoners, Rufus forces himself to watch.

> He [the Major; ann. RS] [...] stretched out his hand and commenced dripping oil on the bowed heads. I returned to the Doctor, shaken. I turned away so as not to watch the shock and pain and frustration on the bowed faces as the precious, corrosive liquid touched their skins. The Doctor also looked away toward the water [...]. But I couldn’t turn my face away for long. I was a journalist: my job was to observe, and to write about it later. To be a witness for posterity. (*Oil* 60)

The journalists in the novel are seldom in the position to directly interfere in any of the situations they witness. They are mostly bystanders and as such they are limited to recording and reporting the events.

Rufus struggles with this notion of reporters as impotent bystanders. This also seems to have impacted Zaq. One could assume that the constant confrontation with traumatic events throughout his career may have resulted in his alcoholism.

> I’ve seen children snatched away from their mothers, never to be reunited. I’ve seen husbands taken from their wives and kids and sent away to prison. I’ve seen grown men flogged by soldiers in front of their kids. That’s how history is made, and it’s our job to witness it. (*Oil* 66)

As he continues to elaborate on how journalists are not only conduits for traumatic experiences, but also have the chance to witness and report on positive events.

> - And is it always like this?
> - No, not always. I’ve also witnessed ordinary bystanders pull passengers from burning cars, I’ve seen judges sentence generals and politicians to hard labor, without fear. I’ve seen students stand up to soldiers and policemen, protesting against injustice. If you’re patient, you’ll see those moments too, and you’ll write about them. (*Oil* 66)

While journalists have to give a platform to the powerful, they choose to also give a voice to the powerless. Rufus' interview with Chief Ibrahim does not serve any particular purpose, but to record the experiences of the voiceless people in society that suffer the most from the self-dealings of the powerful.

> Communities like this had borne the brunt of the oil wars, caught between the militants and the military. The only way they could avoid being crushed out of existence was to pretend to be deaf and dumb and blind (*Oil* 37)

Rufus does publish a text on the village's story in a newspaper during the course of the novel, but considering its rapid demise, one can assume that it will have vanished by the time his newspaper publishes it. And even if that is not the case, his reports cannot change the fact that the waterways in the Delta are poisoned, the fish are dead and the land has become barren. At the time of the interview, the damage to the community had already been done and the village is in the process of dissolution.

Similarly, the journalists can give a voice to the Doctor at the military camp, but they cannot positively influence the situation. His scientific findings are ignored by the government and the local communities, but when the journalists arrive, he feels that someone with a sympathetic ear has finally arrived and he tells Rufus of his experiences. The Doctor has a desire to share his insights, and is thinking about publishing a book (*Oil* 151). The journalistic attention Rufus can offer is a rare prospect for change to him.

Only once throughout the entire novel does someone rely on Rufus' actions to have an immediate positive impact. An attack by the military leaves many of villagers on Irikefe injured. But the major places the island under a curfew, without providing any medical attention. In an act of desperation, Rufus is sent to Port Harcourt to spread the news of the attack and elicit help via the media.

> - Slip away. Go to Port Harcourt and tell the editors what's happening here. We're trapped here for at least a week --- you heard what he said. No one out there knows what's going on here. These people need help. Soon, in a day or two, if they don't get it, they'll start dying... [...]
> - Go to Beke, my editor. He is a resourceful person. He has his faults, but he can talk to the others editors. He has good contacts in Lagos. (*Oil* 183)

Their hopes are ultimately shattered, as Rufus is too sick to successfully complete the task. By the time he returns Zaq is dead and the soldiers have already left the island.

6.6 The ambivalent impact of journalism

The impact of journalistic reporting in the novel is not always positive. The journalists are non-archetypal characters, so they influence their environment for the better as well as for the worse. Although the novel frequently alludes to questions of morality and the quest for truth, its protagonists are not always guided by these notions. The influence they exert on their environment, as well as their motivations, are of an ambivalent nature.

Zaq's and Rufus' main goal is to seek the story around the British hostage, but their actions have little to no impact on her future. Although the hostage's fate guides the main plot, Rufus' contact to Isabel is limited to a brief interview on Chief Ibrahim's boat, just before she is recaptured by the rebels (*Oil* 205). The journalist also only finds her by coincidence during his flight from the military. He does not have any positive influence on her situation, since Isabel only manages to escape due to Salomon's help (*Oil* 191). Rufus can also not keep her from being recaptured by the rebels. The journalist is restricted to observation and chronicling her story. Interviewing her gives him insight into the marriage of James and Isabel, as she describes James' betrayal. Her version of the story contradicts the implied image in the press coverage of James being a worrying and loving husband.

Rufus' and Zaq's work also has negative effects on the people they encounter. Tamuno and Michael, who are their guides through the Delta, expect to profit directly from the journalists. Tamuno attempts to secure his son's future by convincing the journalists to take Michael into their care (*Oil* 40). Zaq agrees reluctantly, but is not able to keep his word. Shortly after he agrees to take in the child, the four are abducted by the military. Tamuno's and Michaels involvement in the journalists' search leads to their imprisonment and subsequent torture (*Oil* 62). Instead of improving the child's prospects by helping the journalists, the father inadvertently endangers his life. The journalists seem to be drawn to danger, thereby endangering those who accompany them. That is not the only time Tamumo's association with the journalists puts his son's well-being at risk. The first time they attempt to make contact with an associate of the militia, they are caught in the middle of a raid and only narrowly escape unharmed. Tamuno's hopes in gaining from his efforts to aid the journalists are ultimately undercut when Zaq dies.

The religious community on Irikefe also suffers from their involvement. Zaq and Rufus find shelter in the village during their search for the hostage. Zaq suspects the priests on the island of cooperating with the rebels and so he confronts Neman, the aide of

the head priestess (*Oil* 136). The community does not want to get caught in the conflict between the rebels and the military and so Neman lies to Zaq and Rufus about the hostage. He claims that the rebels came to the island to seek medical help for the hostage, but that she died and was buried on the island. Fuelled by their distrust and inquisitiveness, Zaq and Rufus desecrate the woman's alleged grave. Rufus tries to drown the sense of wrongdoing in alcohol, but to him, finding the story even justifies digging up graves.

> I drank to make myself insensitive to the accusing ghost eyes in the light's fringes, eyes whose glow seemed to pierce through my body to my very soul, and with every mouthful, every shovelful , I grew as excited as Zaq, and in my mind I repeated his phase: Our job is to find out the truth, even if it is buried deep in the earth. (*Oil* 144)

Naman claims that he did not lie to them, but that he was not present for the funeral and only repeated to them what he was told by the rebel leader. The novel does not clarify whether Naman is truthful or not, but no matter who the source of the lie is, its intention was to discourage anyone who is investigating the woman's fate from following her trail. This could have led to a decrease in military and rebel involvement on the island of Irikefe. Aside from safety concerns, their journalistic inquisitiveness has negative consequences on a spiritual level for the inhabitants of the island. The head priestess dies the same night Rufus and Zaq desecrate the grave. The island is depicted as a fragile paradise that is surrounded by devastation, pollution and war. The society on the island thrives, because it respects nature and is in harmony with it. Naman indicates that by giving in to their journalistic curiosity and desecrating the graveyard, the sensitive equilibrium of the nature worshipping society is threatened.

> Our head priest died this morning. And now we cannot bury her because your activity last night has disrupted the balance of things. A purification ceremony has to be carried out. [...] We don't know how long the ritual will take [...], because we have never been faced with such a situation before. Noone has ever desecrated a grave before today. (*Oil* 174)

Zaq had been staying with the community for a few days before the incident on the graveyard. When the other journalists initially travel back to Port Harcourt to write their reports, Zaq decides to stay. Plagued from what would later turn out to be Dengue fever, he hopes to recover on the island. Also, it is his one chance to overcome his alcohol addiction, since there is no possibility to feed it.

> - Call him [Beke, Zaq's editor; ann. RS] and tell him I'll be back in a few days.
> [...] For the first time since our arrival at the destroyed militant camp, he had a smile on his face. He motioned for me to come closer, and when I leaned forward I could smell stale drink on his breath and see clearly into his watery and red and yellow eyes.
> - I like the air here. It's pure. Who knows, I might even get some sort of religion. (*Oil* 92)

It is upon Rufus' return, that he relapses into alcoholism, and they both uncover the grave in an inebriated state. As a punishment, Neman places them under house arrest, but he realises that they are driven by their curiosity, so he sends Tamuno to help them in their search (*Oil* 178). The journalists' obsession with finding the hostage forces Neman to expel them from the island, which denies Zaq his last chance at recovery.

6.7 Zaq as the ideal journalist

Zaq is depicted as a person who has managed to change society to the better through journalism, but has fallen from his ideals. His peers - senior journalists and editors who entered into journalism at the same time as he - hold him in low regard. When Rufus' editor attempts to find volunteers for the coverage of the story and mentions that Zaq works on the story too, he laughs and grows derisive (*Oil* 55). Zaq's editor, Beke, employs him only to bolster his own ego.

> All the time I was in that windowless, airless office, with my good friend Beke out there behind his editor's desk gloating over the fact that he was now actually my employer, the great Zaq cut down to size --- he always envied me you see [...] (*Oil* 133)

Beke remembers Zaq from when he was a young and idealistic reporter.

> He was full of ideas, restless. At night he never slept. He wanted to do feature stories about everyday things, ordinary lives. But this was a different age, late seventies, early eighties, things were different then. People bought papers for news only, facts, or at least that was how the editor saw it. But Zaq wasn't the kind of person to sit around waiting for things to change. He quit, just like that. (*Oil* 118)

Young Zaq is depicted as a restless, rebellious journalist, who gives up his monetary security to follow his dreams and write stories that matter to him, and to change the status quo. His reporting style changes and he focuses on the outcasts of society. In his articles he gives those who are not heard a voice. His reporting on the prostitutes of Port Harcourt makes him famous and it is for these reports that Rufus idolises him (*Oil* 25). His work is impactful because it provides a kind of compassion for those, who, until then, were scorned by society. It depicts the women as victims and seeks to challenge society's prejudice against them and provides them with a chance to make their stories known. As a consequence of Zaq's work, the police and politicians take action to improve the situation of these women (*Oil* 121). A scholarship is established, which allows underprivileged women who are trapped in prostitution to pursue a higher education, as is the case with

the prostitute Zaq had fallen in love with, Anita. During the most repressive military regime, the Abacha administration, Zaq becomes editor of an oppositional newspaper and a promoter of the pro-democracy movement. Like most journalists, he is persecuted for his work. He reaches the zenith of his career during that time. Beke describes Zaq's downfall as an inherent consequence of the journalistic principle of opposition. With the switch to democracy, Zaq lost a rewarding target for critique.

> He went back to his former paper, Action!, and continued his in-depth, weekend-style features. But not with the same conviction. By then he had started drinking heavily. His editorials became increasingly critical of the new government that he and his pro-democracy pals had worked so hard to bring to power, but then in 2003 he joined the government. (*Oil* 123)

The political influence that his journalistic work has is admired by his compatriots, but his direct involvement in politics is his downfall. The newsman becomes the news and instead of writing stories about it, he has to influence the political landscape directly. Ironically, the press is the journalist's worst enemy in the political arena. As Anita steps back in his life, the tabloids start to make his private life a matter of public interest.

> She had been to university, she had a good job with a bank in Lagos, but of course her veneer of respectability didn't stop the gutter press from tagging them 'the Prostitute and the Radical.' [...] I remembered, this was in 2004, the year I first met Zaq, the year he gave that lecture at my school, the year his heavy drinking began to finally take its toll on him. (*Oil* 123)

During a trip to a conference in London, customs agents find cocaine in Zaq's toilet bag. It is assumed that it was Anita's cocaine, but Zaq decides not to testify against her. Both Zaq and Anita are imprisoned, which pushes her into suicide and spells an end to his career.

Zaq's activist reporting is the source of his greatest success – professionally and privately – and his greatest defeat. The traumatic experiences he suffers in the course of his journalistic career start a circle of self-destruction and alcoholism, well before his professional demise. The first time Rufus and Zaq meet personally is at a dinner after his graduation celebration. Rufus and two other young female journalists are the only students invited to that dinner with Zaq and some professors. Tolu is at the top of their class, but described as physically unattractive.

> Tolu, like me, was a big fan of the great journalist and I was sure somewhere in her bag was a recorder and a little notebook with a long list of questions she wanted to ask him [...] Besides being the brainiest student in my class, she was also the most aggressive, the most annoying and the least pretty, with sickly yellow eyes that had a disconcerting way of looking at you without blinking. (*Oil* 20)

The other, Linda, is described as physically attractive and seems to be most keen on entertaining him.

> We were in the back room of a Chinese restaurant in Ikeja; the girls were seated on both sides of Zaq. Linda giggled she poured more red wine into his glass, contriving to thrust her remarkable chest into his face as she did so. I was across the table, and on my left were my two lecturers, Ms. Ronke and Mr. Malik. Their hands, I could see clearly, were in each other's crotches under the table. (*Oil* 20)

The two female journalists are direct opposites and are indicatively seated on either side of Zaq. Tolu is diligent and unrelentless to a point that her presence irritates the ones around her. Her character traits are an allegory for journalistic perseverance and thoroughness, as her questioning eyes have a "disconcerting way of looking at you without blinking" (*Oil* 20). Linda on the other hand is a symbol for the vices plaguing Zaq. She fuels his alcoholism and is relentlessly trying to gain his attention, distracting him from his surroundings. The senior journalists at the table, Mr. Malik and Ms. Ronke, are only interested in each other, with no care for the world around them. In the course of the dinner, Rufus' realises Zaq's isolation. The idealism that fuelled his journalistic work had been replaced by a retreat into alcoholism. The other senior journalists around him do not care for him or the young journalists. As he gradually succumbs to alcoholism, the man who achieved fame by fighting corruption and tyranny and was a champion of the underdog, has shut himself off from his surroundings and has in turn become irrelevant to the world around him.

The story on the British hostage provides a possibility for Zaq to redeem himself. James Floode is also impressed by Zaq's past work and it is for that reason that he approaches him directly. Zaq turns the offer down at first, but then accepts reluctantly, because he feels insulted by the condescending attitude of James' bodyguard.

> Now Black Suit and James were at the door. Black Suit pulled it open.
> - Gentlemen, thanks for your time. This visit must remain between us…
> -I'll go. I'll do it. (*Oil* 34)

Zaq said it was the tone of the man's voice that made him look up. The voice was dismissive, almost derisive. And he felt what he hadn't felt in a long time: pride, vanity --- two things he had always tried to avoid because they had no place in a reporter's life.

The perceived slight on his pride motivated Zaq to return to his journalistic roots. He describes his position at the newspaper as the one of a 'desk journalist' and he seems to deeply regret his professional decline. His employer, Beke, had gotten into the profession at the same time as him, and enjoys the fact that he is above Zaq in the professional hierarchy. To Zaq, the job at Beke's paper is meaningless, and his desk job is a monument of his professional downfall.

> Beke came and laid a fat hand on Zaq's shoulder. Zaq was looking at the dirty carpet. It had patterns of green-and-red interlocking squares on it, but the squares were now faded, ground into loose ribbons

> and threads by countless washings, and footsteps, and something else, a kind of despair, a lack of the energy needed for holding on [...]. The chairs and tables and filing cabinets hat the same look, as did the faces and shoulders of his fellow reporters as they came in off the crowded buses and the merciless streets early in the morning. He had seen it on faces coming off the buses [...]: a drugged, let-me-just-get-through-the-day look (*Oil* 33)

To him, journalism whose production is confined to an office is meaningless. His boss, his colleagues, even the office's interior testify to the demise of not only himself, but the profession. Zaq is a representative of political journalism. To him, meaningful journalism is inherently political. This is in line with the fact, that his most prominent work gave a voice to the downtrodden of society. His approach towards journalism puts a face to those who are politically unrepresented and are disregarded by the established media. But the inherent logic of his approach towards journalism places him in the political arena, which makes him a vulnerable target for attacks. After all, it was his political ambition which led to his professional demise in the past.

Rufus reminds him of the vision he had for society and journalism in the past. During their second encounter, years after Rufus' graduation dinner, Zaq does not remember the young journalist, who had taken care of him in his drunken stupor. Rufus awkwardly tries to build a connection to this idol, by talking to him about his perspectives on journalism, but Zaq does not even remember the contents of his own lectures.

> He looked a bit uncomfortable, turning away partially from me. But I went on, hoping he might remember if I jogged his memory hard enough.
> - In that lecture you talked about journalists as conservationists... that we scribble for posterity... and you said most of what we write may be ephemeral, a note here about a car accident, a column there about a market fire, a suicide, a divorce, yet once in a while, maybe once in a lifetime, comes a transcendental moment, a great story only the true journalist can do justice to - I see. Well, your memory is better than mine. That was a long time ago. I was giving lots of lectures back then. (*Oil* 79)

The process of reporting, his return to an investigative approach, is what reintroduces him to the convictions he kept in the past. In the course of their investigations, he slowly finds back to his old self. The onset of this process coincides with his stay on the island of Irikefe. The island and its environment have a healing effect on him, in a physical as well as spiritual sense. When Rufus returns to Irikefe from Port Harcourt, he finds Zaq a changed man. Zaq faces his biggest fear, to lead a meaningless life, and proposes to Rufus that they could run a newspaper together.

> - [...] All the time I was in that windowless, airless office [...] my greatest fear was that I'd die there, unable to get out and follow a true story one more time. I knew all I had to do was stand up and walk out, but I was scared. I've failed so many times before, in my profession, and in many other things as well.
> - You are talking in riddles, Zaq.
> - I have plans. I can get backers. Come with me to Lagos and we'll start a new paper, a real paper. (*Oil* 133)

6.8 Conflicting notions of journalism

Rufus and Zaq have a different understanding of the role journalists should take in their reporting. While Zaq argues that journalists have to be detached from the subject of their reporting, Rufus seems to argue for greater interference by journalists. Zaq's philosophy concerning journalistic reporting is revealed in the course of their detention by the military. After their apprehension by the military, the journalists are split from their guides. While Zaq and Rufus are allowed to move about the base freely, Tamuno and Michael are put in cages and tortured. It is then, that Zaq points out that journalism is limited to witnessing and reporting events.

> - What can we do to help the old man and his son, Zaq?
> - Nothing my young friend. I wish it were that easy to intervene and change the course of things. It isn't. We'll observe, and then we'll write about it when we can. (*Oil* 65)

Rufus is upset by the crime he has witnessed, but Zaq describes non-interference as essential to journalistic reporting.

> - I'd have given a lot not to have witnessed the boy and his father being drenched [in petrol; ann. RS] by the Major.
> - I've seen children snatched away from their mothers, never to be reunited. I've seen husbands taken from their wives and kids and sent away to prison. I've seen grown men flogged by soldiers in front of their kids. That's how history is made, and it's our job to witness it. (*Oil* 66)

Although he has a sense of what is right and wrong, Zaq realises the limitations of journalism. Rufus' on the other hand feels an urge to interfere in the subject of his reports. For example, when the military commander of the camp, who is only referred to as the Major, tortures prisoners, Rufus decides to challenge him, even though he is at his mercy.

> - What of the old man and his child? They're innocent, nothing to do with all these---
> - Go. I have work to do.
> - I must insist Major.
> - Insist? Did you say insist? [...] There is a war going on! [...] You insist! I can shoot you right now and throw you into the swamp and that's it. Now get out. (*Oil* 64)

Rufus finds himself in a similar situation, after having been abducted by the rebels. One of the prisoners, Salomon, confides in Rufus and tells him everything he knows about the rebels and the kidnapping of Isabel Floode. When that prisoner is secretly executed, Rufus challenges the leader's narrative.

> - [...] He jumped off the cliff and fell on the rocks below. He died instantly.
> I closed my eyes.

- His body was taken away by the river. A tragedy, don't you think?
- I find it hard to believe...
The Professor stepped forward till he was standing right in front of me [...]
- Are you calling me a liar, reporter? (*Oil* 230)

6.9 Sharing trauma

Rufus is the protagonist of the novel. The young journalist's family comes from the small village of Junction, which is a fictional village located in Nigeria's south. Throughout the story Rufus has several flashbacks about an accident in his youth, which left most of the village in ruins, tore his family apart, and maimed his sister. Desperate for a source of income, the community relied, like so many others, on the illegal oil trade. Rufus' father owned an illegitimate business selling stolen fuel and oil. An accident in his facility caused the destruction of large parts of the village and he was sent to prison. While Rufus was not present during the accident itself, it left Boma, Rufus' sister, with burn marks over half of her face. The smell of petrol still gives him flashbacks to when he visited Boma in the hospital (*Oil* 134). The whole family was traumatised by the incident, and Rufus mentions that it was the reason he started writing. His report on the accident was also the first work for which he received recognition as a writer. He is aware of the connection between his traumatic experience and his profession as a reporter.

> In his lecture that day in Lagos, Zaq said that the best stories are the ones we write with tears in our eyes, the ones whose stings we feel personally. After visiting my sister at the hospital, unable to sleep, haunted by the image of burned flesh and the smell of petrol that clung to the hospital walls and corridors, I picked up a pen and paper and the words had come effortlessly. [...] To be a great reporter required a lot of suffering, a lot of backstory, and I was finding that out for myself. (*Oil* 134)

Rufus' own traumatic experiences were a starting point in his journalistic career. He started writing in order to remember the experiences of that day, which are sometimes clouded in his memory (*Oil* 3). He does the same thing for the people who share their stories with him; he creates a written record of their experiences to ensure that they are not forgotten. But the role of the passive witness gnaws on him. Witnessing the torture of Tamuno and his son reminds him of one of Zaq's lectures, in which he said about journalism that "this job will sometimes break your heart" (*Oil* 63). As is the case with the injuries of his beloved sister, no reporting of his can alleviate the pain he witnesses; he can only inform his readers about it.

Boma's nicknames for Rufus are the Lucky One and Mr. Lucky, because during their childhood, he always escaped dangerous situations unharmed (*Oil* 110). That was true for the accident in the village and it is also the case for his research in the Niger Delta. While he is a witness to crimes and human rights violations, he is never subject to mistreatment. Rufus and Zaq stand by while Tamuno and Michael are tortured by the Major, Rufus is released from the militants' prison unharmed while Salomon is shot and they witness the killings by the military on Irikefe from a safe distance. Concerning Boma's injuries and the family's trauma, he claims that he wished he "had been there when it happened, to share in her pain, my family's pain" (*Oil* 110). Journalism in the novel seems to provide this exact function - the ability to create empathy, to share someone else's pain.

6.10 Fighting over the narrative

The journalists in the novel hear the narratives from all parties with a stake in the Niger Delta. All these groups have a desire, if not vital interest, to propagate their point of view. Both the military and the rebels seize every opportunity they are provided to spread their propaganda. The rebels especially integrate the media in their political fight. Their ransom schemes are dependent on the cooperation with the media. To them, journalists function as neutral arbiters and they deploy them for the delivery of ransom demands. While the journalists do not pose a physical threat and can be led to locations of their choosing (*Oil* 7), the rebels heed their power over the public narrative. The rebel group around the Professor demonstrates its dominance by temporarily jailing Rufus, yet he does not feel threatened, because he is aware of the propagandistic value his reports can provide to the rebels' cause.

Militarily, the rebel forces are inferior to the army forces in the Delta, but the interview gives the Professor the chance to project power on a propagandistic level. It is worth noting here that his instructions to Rufus are delivered in the imperative.

> You reporters, you are always clever with words --- me, I am a soldier, I know how to fight, and I will never stop fighting till I achieve my goal. Write that when you get back. (*Oil* 231)

Shortly before his release, Rufus also makes inquiries concerning a hostage the rebels took during a raid on the island of Irikefe. When the Professor realises that the abduction of a local woman could damage his reputation, he does not hesitate to issue a veiled threat against Rufus, pressuring him to promote the rebels' narrative.

> Do you think we'd keep her here against her wish, rape her, maybe? We are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. [...] Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them? [...] That is why I'm letting you go, so you can write the truth. And be careful, whatever you write, be careful. I am watching you. I have people everywhere. (*Oil* 232)

Likewise, the Major has an interest in gaining power over the narrative of the conflict. When Rufus and Zaq are detained by a military patrol and taken to the camp, the Major is swift to demonstrate his power. The claim of being journalists is protection enough to keep them save temporarily, while Tamuno and Michael are thrown in with the rebel prisoners and openly tortured (*Oil* 59). In a private conversation, the Major suggests that it may as well be them, kneeling on the floor in chains.

> We're looking for the woman too, everyone is looking for her. You think you can find her if we can't? Still, I don't trust you. I can't trust you, you see my dilemma? You have till tomorrow to think of something. Talk to the other guy. Tomorrow, I want proof. Answers. Otherwise I'll have to lock you up with the rebels and treat you the same way. (*Oil* 64)

In the camp, the Major has absolute control over the narrative. One of the prisoners discloses to Zaq and Rufus that the Major indoctrinates the soldiers on a daily basis.

> I know exactly what they're doing out there: right now the soldiers will be in line, shoulder to shoulder, all twenty of them, one sergeant, two corporals and the rest privates, all standing at attention, and he'll be telling them why they must hate the militants, why they must fight to keep the country safe and united. Ten minutes of that. I've been here for four days and I know exactly what they do every minute of the day. (*Oil* 165)

To the Major the journalists are a tool for reaching out to the general population and to publicly justify the human rights violations under his command. But he is aware that the news media is not bound to adopt his narrative and, as he points out, is potentially averse to his practices.

> You journalists, with your fancy ideas about human rights and injustice... all nonsense. There are no human rights for people like him. You jail them and in a year they'll be out on the streets. The best thing is to line them up and shoot them. But you people... (*Oil* 157)

7 For the Mercy of Water

7.1 The Author

After finishing her studies in Journalism at Stellenbosch University, Karen Jayes worked for a number of lifestyle and outdoor magazines in London. She used her occupation as a source of inspiration for her writing. Specifically, conflicts ensuing from water scarcity and privatisation of critical infrastructure served as a basis for her novel (Anonymous 2012). She continued to work as editor for various international magazines and online news outlets, before beginning her teaching career at CityVarsity School of Social Sciences and Humanities, where she teaches creative writing and journalism to date.

Jayes converted to Islam during the time when she was writing her first book, *For the Mercy of Water*, and is a political and religious activist and spokesperson for CAGE Africa, a London-based advocacy group focused on human rights violations against Muslims. Statements and opinion pieces published in her role as representative of CAGE are frequently focussed on political persecution of Muslims and the impact of anti-terror policies on dissidents, journalists and the general Muslim population.

For her writing, Jayes was awarded the PEN Studzinski Literary Award in 2009, the South African Sunday Times Literary Award for Fiction and the South African Literary Award, both in 2013.

7.2 Plot

The novel is set in an unnamed African country, which suffers from chronic water shortage due to climate change and continuing droughts. The precise sequence of events is unclear, but the reader learns that an unnamed water company is in control of the nation's water reserves and rigidly enforces its policy of profit maximisation with complete disregard for human life and ecology. The fight over access to this most basic of all resources has resulted in a water war between the rebels on the one side and the army-backed paramilitaries of the company on the other. It is unclear if the water war is still ongoing, but the paramilitary character of the company still persists.

The protagonist of the novel is a writer who, inspired by online news reports on a lone survivor of a massacre conducted by the company, travels to the community in question to investigate for her writing. The aim as well as the format of her writing is unknown, but she highlights on multiple occasions that she is not a journalist.

Anyone reporting on the company's conduct is regarded with suspicion by the company and its representatives, but she manages to bribe the driver of a supply transport and his guard into taking her to the town mentioned in the report. During the trip, the writer, too, becomes a victim of the company's destructive nature, as she is raped by the guard.

In the valley, she manages to establish contact with the survivor, a caretaker for the remaining girls of the community. While heavily traumatised, she is able to tell the writer of her community's fate: the appropriation of all water in the area by the company, the community's attempt to diverge water for survival, and the violent repression of their efforts by the paramilitary. Most of the townspeople died of thirst shortly after the company had clamped down on people's last means of diverting water from the reservoir. Only the caretaker, who is referred to as 'Grandmother' or 'Mother', and four girls have survived. But the latest attack, during which a group of company soldiers brutally raped the children, left three of the four girls dead, and another, Eve, missing.

By the time the writer reaches the town, the caretaker has been moved to a camp and placed under the observation of a company doctor and two NGO workers. The journalist who had written the initial report that drove the writer into investigating the situation is also present, all the while reporting on the situation and the caretaker's witness. As a response to the increased interest by the media, the company sends an officer from its

public relation department to enforce the company's preferred narrative and also to resolve the situation. After indicating the whereabouts of an injured company officer, who led the latest attack on her and the children, the grandmother is evacuated from the site and the camp is dissolved. The PR officer manages to also evacuate the injured officer, but not without raising the writer's suspicion.

Back in the city, she makes it her goal to find Eve and return her to the caretaker. She discovers that Eve had found entrance to an orphanage, filled with children who suffered a similar fate, but had been imprisoned for attacking a company guard in broad daylight. The writer establishes contact with Eve and slowly gains her trust. She also discovers the injured officer's address, whom she visits with Eve after her release. Together they travel back to the valley, and after narrowly surviving a plane crash, Eve is returned to the caretaker.

7.3 References to South Africa

Although the plot is set in an unnamed country, several indicators suggest that South Africa serves as major source of inspiration. Sofianos (2013) identifies several instances of idiomatic language that is characteristic of South African users of English. Steenkamp (2013) also identifies cultural references, such as a taxi driver using a spanner instead of a steering wheel (*Mercy* 153), or the midtown markets where goods are sold out of hessian bags (*Mercy* 165). Furthermore, Sofianos highlights stylistic similarities to other South African writers and common literary styles.

> *For the Mercy of Water* has roots that stretch deep into South African literature. Its apocalyptic suggestion of country landscapes given over to violence recall the rural-dystopian fictions of Schoeman, Coetzee or Gordimer, while the tense city-action reminds one of Brink's apartheid thrillers. The nature descriptions and prison scenes resonate with the literary past, while the disjointed parables in which Mother knowingly offers her testimony are as vivid and perplexing as any of Schreiner's Dreams, or an old, old, folk tale. (Sofianos 2013)

Also, he identifies the constant threat of media tribunals as a reference to governmental media suppression under Apartheid and post-Apartheid regimes.

7.4 The function of the journalistic side character

The journalist is a supporting character in the novel, but his work inspires the protagonist to investigate the human rights violations in the valley. He discovered Mother during his travels to another location for a story in the area, which indicates a certain frequency of such events. The novel is set in a society that is increasingly indifferent to the violence used in order to supply the population with water. The country's government is corrupt and has created a legal environment that enables companies to suppress any critical reporting. Also, anyone opposing the company puts themselves in the crosshairs of the paramilitary branch of the water company, which adds a physical element to the threat that reporters experience. The journalist, who has uncovered the story about Mother and the fate of her town, is in a singular position: being unable to sell his articles to any national or international newspapers, he is funded by a conglomerate of resistance groups, who are eager to expose the company's crimes (*Mercy* 51).

Although the journalist has only been in the encampment for a few days, he has a deep understanding of the background of the town. Shortly after the writer's arrival, the

journalist accompanies her to the deserted town where Mother was found. On their way to the town, the journalist tells the writer its history in a highly detailed manner. He claims to have arrived there only several days ago, and yet he is aware of some minute details. As they approach the airfield, the journalist informs his companion on the breeding habits of the local birds and how the tarmac keeps their eggs warm at night. The birds perceive the two of them as intruders and start attacking them on their way across the tarmac, but the journalist is entirely unfazed by the attacks, which implies familiarity.

> I began to run from the birds. I heard the sound of their feathers as they flew past my ears, like dry leaves scratching. But the journalist walked on, and he seemed resigned to them. He motioned for me to hurry up without turning around. They circled us and remained close to us until we reached the tower, where we stopped at an old door. 'What's with those birds?' I said. 'They were so close to my head.' He shrugged. 'Don't mind them,' he said. 'Come.' (*Mercy* 45)

It is unclear when the water wars started exactly, but the whole area the town is situated in is devoid of human life, which indicates a long-term conflict. There is no mention on whether the journalist has a personal connection to this region, but he has at least been reporting from the area. The first guard the writer meets explains to her that the beginnings of the war are disputed and discussions around it are a source of distress.

> 'Nobody knows when it started,' he said. 'Nobody among us [the company guards; ann. RS] knows. When some discussion begins over it, it's common for many people to end up in tears, or to fall to their knees in despair. When some effort is made to decide on a date, I have seen grown men lie on the floor and beat their fists against the ground until another one stands up and says, "Enough! We have lost enough! Let us not also lose our minds!"' (*Mercy* 17)

The reactions described by the guard suggest that the water wars inflicted a collective trauma. Even discussions about a minor point such as the onset of the wars result in a breakdown of communication and highly irrational behaviour. The journalist, on the other hand, is an outlier in that regard. There is no indication that he has familial ties to the region, but he is able to give a detailed recount of the town before and during the beginnings of the war.

> 'A man and a woman worked in this tower before the company arrived,' he said. 'It was mostly mail planes and small passenger planes. […] Later on, though, it was just the food and the medicine planes and then some hopeful journalists. Then the drought came and, well. […] The thing I remember most,' he said, 'Was when the lights went out in the early periods of the war. The children were so determined not to let it affect their school work that they walked the path we have just walked every night and they sat under the bright orange lights of the runway to do their homework. (*Mercy* 46)

The journalist is the one who is able to explain the background of the water wars to the writer. He can put into words the desperation of the local population to provide their families with enough water to survive. He has witnessed the consequences of people's thirst – some entered what he called "awful bargains" to receive enough water for their families, others have taken up arms (*Mercy* 48). The journalist does what those directly

involved in the war are unable to do: he communicates traumatic events and shares the experience with the public.

7.5 The moral call of journalism

The novel describes a dysfunctional society that is corrupted by the pursuit of profit. Human life has no intrinsic monetary value, and is therefore irrelevant to the considerations of corporations and the state that they control. The fate of Mother's town is emblematic of the consequences of profit maximisation. Unable to pay for its water supply, the company severed the towns' connection to the water grid, which led to the death of almost all of its inhabitants. The children had assembled in the cellar of the town hall to die and Mother, who was the only grown up left alive, put their remains to rest. There is a company doctor present at the camp, who was sent to take care of any survivors after the journalist had radioed for help when he initially discovered Mother. Upon the writer's request, the doctor leads her to the cellar where the town's children had died from thirst and starvation. The doctor, much like the water company she represents, is emotionally detached from the fate of the town.

> 'I'd like to have a look in the cellar,' I said, pointing back at the hall. She looked towards the hall, shielding her face from the sun with her hand. [...] She let her hand fall and she shrugged. 'Sure,' she said. She turned around, tapping her pockets. 'There's not much to see,' she said, as if speaking to herself. 'Can't do any harm.' I was surprised by her nonchalance. (*Mercy* 54)

The doctor's cynical world view is revealed when she tells the writer not to "get [her] hopes up" before entering the cellar, as if the prospect of seeing the human remains of a whole town was something the writer would expect and look forward to. When they enter the cellar, it is the writer who adds a human touch to the scene, which had been described so nonchalantly by the doctor.

> 'Who cleaned it?' I said. 'She says she did,' the doctor said. 'How many died here?' I said. The doctor shrugged, and turned away. 'They died of hunger,' I said. 'The water ran out and there was no more food in the ground, so they came here to die together. They lit fires and made it light. And she kept as many girls with her as she could, and fed them from her hidden stores ...' The doctor didn't seem to have heard me. She had walked towards the back of the hall. I watched her retreating. It was still, the air thick with the silence of bones. (*Mercy* 55)

The doctor and the writer are opposite characters. The doctor functions within the paramilitary framework of the company, following her orders without any emotional investment. She comprehends the consequences of the company's business practices, but

is resigned to them or may even agree with them. Questions of morality or compassion, concepts that are inherently human, are foreign to her. When the writer notes down her observations in the cellar, the doctor seems baffled and asks her, "why are you doing this?" (*Mercy* 55).

Characters in the novel frequently invoke a deity, which is portrayed as benevolent, righteous and kind. The novel does not dwell on deeper theological discussions, but a religious theme is noticeable. God is almost exclusively mentioned in connection with positive concepts. During her first visit to the town, the writer describes the company's policies and acts as inherently destructive. God, on the other hand, signifies hope for healing amid the devastation.

> It was the first time I had seen such a place, where the company had been and gone, where the face of defeat was set in all its wan peace, in all its blank, stifling present. I stood and looked for some time. I thought about how, for some, towns like these hold the imprint of God, who has just stepped in and out of necessity and *mercy* to lay over their torn parts some method of healing – a rain like ours, or sometimes an earthquake – so that the land beneath, and the living things remaining, may in some way begin again. (*Mercy* 25)

Even when Mother discusses the devastating impact the drought had on her community, she refers to it as a "great test from God" (*Mercy* 32), avoiding any negative connotations in connection with the deity. The protagonists in the novel interpret nature as a present from this god, and even the rain is seen as a "gift from God" (*Mercy* 40) which cleans and heals.

The journalists in the novel are exposed to severe negative repercussions from the company and the government for their work. The political and financial pressure the company can apply on media outlets allows it to control the narrative. Critical journalists, like the one reporting on the town, face economic uncertainty and even imprisonment. But the journalist is not deterred by the negative impact of his reporting on his personal situation, because his motivation is partly based on religious convictions. The writer is convinced that she and the journalist are in God's favour, because they are acting on moral and selfless motives. The reward for their work is of a spiritual nature.

> By doing this [helping the writer unveil the company's wrongdoing; ann. RS], he had moved us both closer to the realm of those who live small but vital lives, who live not for the rewards prescribed and distributed by the powerful, but for the tiny glances of light that come to them, and very personally to them, and that far outweigh any material prize. (*Mercy* 176)

The novel frequently establishes a connection between nature and god. Back in the city, the writer imagines the process of the journalist leaving town after finishing his reporting.

> And then I imagined him, at the end of this assignment, walking away from the site of truth and coming to rest standing near a particular tree. I saw him twisting his body so that he might properly see this tree. I saw him walk around the tree, lift his camera, and turn his head this way and that so that he might better frame the nobility in its architecture and capture for a moment in the branches extended, in the still triumphant bark, and the leaves that mirrored the sun, some of the grace and patience of God, the God he knew he would no longer look for in the actions of men. (*Mercy* 176)

The description of a tree as "architecture" implies direct involvement of a deity in its creation. As opposed to the water company, the journalist does not destroy nature, but documents its beauty in photography as a testament to God's greatness. The politics of the water company are a direct consequence of the needs of modern civilisation and its acts have a destructive effect on both nature and humanity. The activities of the journalist can therefore be seen as antithetical to the water company's policies. The writer's depiction of the journalist indicates that she regards their work as being in god's favour, while the actions of humans do not reflect any connection to God.

7.6 Questioning ideology

The society presented in the novel has been devastated by the company's ruthless capture of natural resources and an ensuing year-long civil war. The company's soldiers conduct atrocities in the region, pillaging the communities and raping even the youngest children. But testimonies of company guards indicate that responsibility for these actions cannot exclusively be shifted to the soldiers on an individual level. These violent acts are, on the one hand, sanctioned by the water company, and on the other hand reinforced by the esprit de corps among the soldiers. The soldiers seem to be aware of the immorality of such acts, but in order to be able to fulfil their duties towards the company, they suppress critical thought. Reflecting on the impact and morality of their acts would undermine their effectiveness as soldiers.

The officer in charge of the attack on the town was injured by Eve. He had found two girls, Noni and Eve, playing in a nearby cave and attempted to rape them. After he killed Noni and violated her corpse, Eve managed to attack the soldier with a knife and blind him in the process. In response to the public pressure created by the journalist's reporting, the company decides to launch an internal inquiry, during which the officer is interviewed. The journalist is allowed to attend the hearing and records the guard's testimony, which he passes on to the writer. The inquiry is designed to be a fig leaf for the company, and not to

punish the officer. During the hearing the guard delivers what could be considered a confession. In its course he discusses the events during the attack, as well as the logic behind the soldiers' violence towards the civilian population and the destructive character of the water company's war.

> 'It is hard to say. I suppose I saw them and I saw … something else. An enemy … I can't say now … It could have been the war. It could have been that I was a soldier in a war … I don't know. They tell you all the time you can do what you like with them … It's … part of it.' […] 'When we came across a village and there was no food or money to take, or there were no weapons, we would take this [meaning rape of children; ann. RS]. It's not a question of enjoying. It's a question of … defeating. (*Mercy* 147)

In order to be able to conduct such brutal acts, the company guards have to dehumanise their victims. They are simply embodiments of a faceless enemy that is to be defeated by any means. The idea to use sexual violence as a means of warfare is actively promoted by the water company, and is in parts intended as a reward system for the soldiers. While the water company's practice of water collection deprives nature of its ability to regenerate, its soldiers destroy the basis of life for the local population by thwarting any efforts to gain access to water and killing the children, who would one day become Mothers themselves.

During his testimony, the officer also describes the esprit de corps as a source of sexual violence. The soldiers share the experience of committing this crime; none of them are innocent and therefore are less likely to turn against their fellow soldiers. The officer describes this as a method to enforce loyalty among the members of the corps.

> 'What you must do is … It's cold and simple. There is no other way … 'We learn it from each other … We learn it through cruelty and discipline and the might of the … company … It becomes about … loyalty. It is a kind of … blindness – I see that now … But at the time, when you are in it, it feels like a sort of … spirit. (*Mercy* 148)

When among themselves, the soldiers do not dwell on the morality of their actions, but the officer describes an acute awareness of wrongdoing when reflecting on his actions by himself.

> 'When you are without your men, you start to see things … You start to … You recognise the sickness to be found in your acts. Always, in some way, your heart questions the acts … Only the very cruel and very strong can ignore it. But at the time … you are just so deep in it that you don't see anything else … (*Mercy* 148)

Although the officer must have overseen and taken part in many such attacks, the terms he uses to describe the practice are emotionally loaded, which means he has not come to terms with his involvement in them. These cruel and heinous attacks are so offensive to human nature, that the soldier cannot suppress a sense of guilt even though he conducted such attacks for years. Reflecting on them brings him to question his actions,

and that is what happens during the hearings. Since there were no witnesses to the murder and rape of Noni in the cave, his confessing to it indicates that he does not have to fear prosecution and can speak openly. Even though he has lost his eyesight, it is only during the hearing that he resigns from his position, which implies that he would have had the option to stay with the company.

Multiple times throughout the novel, company employees reveal that they have to resist reflecting on their actions in order to be able to fulfil their roles. In the course of the hearing the officer reveals that he viewed his victims as "targets - like in a game" (*Mercy* 148).

> 'This spirit … When you're in there … It's more important than individual lives, more important than … The age of its victims becomes unimportant. So you … You do all these things without thinking or … else you get … You go crazy.'
> [interviewer speaks]
> 'You put yourself in a game. You make it like a game.' (*Mercy* 148)

Also, during her first encounter with company guards, they reveal to the writer that they cannot allow themselves to think about what they do. The need for water, and therefore money, supersedes any moral considerations. One of the guards has grown up in a similar community as Mother's, but left it in search of work.

> So we stopped going to school. We needed money, to drink and eat, not lessons to think. People like you are always talking about education, but we don't need to think. We need to eat. And now, especially, with this work, we do not think.'
> The driver shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'That's not true.'
> 'It is,' said the guard. 'We do not think. In a war you get to this place. It is possible.' (*Mercy* 19)

When the writer arrives in the valley, Mother is being held by a company doctor and two members of a company supported non-governmental organisation. Mother tells the story of the attack in several episodes, but the doctor and the NGO workers do not consider her accounts to describe actual events. They argue that her story is a product of her imagination, which may be based on her own experience with rape (*Mercy* 58). To justify investigations into the matter, the journalist and the writer have to contradict this assumption and consider her story the truth. But the doctor faced similar situations with such frequency that she cannot tolerate the thought of there being any truth to Mother's narrative.

> 'We can't find any remains,' said the doctor.
> 'Have you seen the classroom?' I said. I stepped forward towards them. They frowned at me. 'What about the handprints, the marks on the wall in the classroom, the smell in the hall …?'
> The aid worker let out a sound like a cough. 'She seems to have been quite taken in by all this,' the doctor said to the aid worker.
> 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But I think –'
> 'No,' said the doctor. She raised her hand and stepped towards me. 'Don't think.' (*Mercy* 61, 62)

The water company's employees can only work in the company's best interest, if they block out any moral considerations. While the soldiers consciously refuse to reflect on their wrongdoings, the civilian employees pretend not to see anything questionable and rationalise what they witness. What both have in common, though, is that they refuse to question their behaviour, although they are all to a certain extent aware of the harm, suffering and destruction that result from the company's presence. The journalist's and the writer's investigations force them to question the compromises they have made in order to be able to function within the system by appealing to a suppressed sense of morality. But while the questions the two are asking are uncomfortable, they do not affect any of those concerned enough to cause a change in behaviour.

The rationale behind the writer's and the journalist's work is in direct opposition with the interests of the company. While the company employees are trying to block out any critical thoughts, the intent of journalistic activity is to provoke critical reflection. The journalist is convinced that the actions of the water company are detrimental to the interest of the greater society.

> '[…] The government has sold the very thing that keeps us alive, into a business and a security concern run primarily by international shareholders, who are their benefactors. It's suicide.' (*Mercy* 47)

The company workers have arranged themselves with the water company in order to not only be able to survive, but to live in the relative comfort of the city. The journalist, on the other hand, focuses on the overall prospects of society. To him it is obvious that corporate interests are detrimental to the well-being of society. He questions the fundamental logic on which the company's policies are built and that allow anyone who promotes its interests to thrive. His humanistic approach, that regards access to safe drinking water as a fundamental human right, is a challenge to the company's goal of profit maximisation and those who profit and enforce those goals.

The journalist's work is driven by egalitarian ideals. In one of the first conversations he has with the writer, he bemoans the water waste of the urban population.

> 'But in the city,' I said, 'it doesn't seem that bad.'
> 'Of course not,' he said. 'The cities get the water first. You get your warnings to conserve it, but on the whole, people there simply continue to consume it. They sip whiskey and wine and cooldrinks that take gallons of water to produce. They continue to urinate and empty their bowels into glistening porcelain bowls and shower for two hours and run their dishwashers twice a day. They keep on refilling their topaz swimming pools after their children splash the water all over the bricks.' (*Mercy* 49)

The water company's purpose is to create revenue for its shareholders by redistributing water from economically less potent rural communities to the more affluent urban population, without regards to basic human needs. The water company, therefore,

even gains from wasteful water use in the city, because the rich cities can pay more per unit than the poor towns and villages. Although the protagonist has a considerable interest in the water company's actions, she indicates that she is not fully aware of the impact this redistribution has. One function of journalism is to provide the population with information, based on which the people will cast their political votes. Journalism is therefore intrinsically political, in democratic as well as non-democratic forms of government. The journalist's efforts to inform the public of the company's dealings in the town are relevant to the firm, because they could theoretically lead to political repercussions.

7.7 Journalism giving voice to victims of the status quo

In the course of her investigations, the writer encounters both victims and perpetrators of the water wars. The reason why she travels to the valley where the town is located, is to report on the survivors of the attack, but the novel uses the character to give voice to all sides. While the soldiers are guilty of numerous crimes against the civilian population, they too are part of the society as a whole, and thus suffer from the ecological collapse and the dominance of the water company. The soldiers are not recruited out of a warrior class, but from the general population. It is out of desperation and overwhelming economical pressure that they join the ranks of the water company. During her conversation with the guard on her way to Mother's town, he elaborates on the futility of the war. After all, the soldiers wage a war against their own society.

> 'Now this war over water we can't win,' he said. 'Everybody will lose.'
> 'Of course,' I said.
> 'It is now about the manner in which we are losing,' he said. (*Mercy* 17)

Both the guard, as well as the officer, reveal that joining the company's paramilitary branch was the only way for them to afford water. The guard grew up in a community similar to Mother's and his background reveals that the economic pressure created by the company drives the population to turn on itself.

> 'The water, it cost us more than three months' wages, of a person who is working in the city, just for one family every month,' he said. […] 'Here, in these places … There is no money. It is hard for you to understand, but there is not even a coin sometimes. There is only dust.'
> He paused and stared at me and his eyes were hard. 'It has become a very costly human urge,' he said, 'this thirst.' (*Mercy* 18)

Although he does not elaborate on his biographical background, the officer's statements during the hearing indicate that he has been a soldier for all his adult life. After the incident in the cave, he resigns his commission in the course of the hearing and retires, which forces him to face an uncertain future.

> '[…] Well, sir. I no longer wish to be of service to the company.' [interviewer speaks] 'Yes … I am aware of the implications.' [interviewer speaks] 'I know. I have no business … Except money and violence … I will always be … between these things.' (*Mercy* 151)

Given the violence and loss she experienced in the course of the conflict, Mother's character could be interpreted as an embodiment of the civilian victims of war. But although she has seen her community wither under the overwhelming power of the water company, she does not regard soldiers and civilians as binary opposites. Rather, she is aware that the war is not a mere matter of soldiers killing civilians, but of humanity cannibalising itself. In her description of how she found the soldier who was blinded by Eve, she elaborates on how although the soldiers commit such horrible crimes, they too are human.

> 'I have seen many years of war – so many that I cannot count. But then I am seeing the soldier's face with the eyes that are pools of blood. And this blood from his eyes is running down from his head and it is running into Noni's blood, and they are running together into the water. It is hard to explain what I am thinking, but I am thinking that the human body, it is mostly water. And I am seeing in this blood and water and the way he is lying blind, that we are busy down here fighting a war over our bodies. We are fighting a war over every piece of life in all of us. It is down to this last thing, and it will consume us. We will consume us.' (*Mercy* 93)

7.8 Fight over narrative – public relations vs. journalism

The company is engaged in a war over water against the impoverished segments of the population, the extent of which it actively tries to conceal from its customers and its overseas shareholders. The same dominance it imposes on a physical level over the population, it attempts to establish in terms of narrative. Any critical investigations into the company's conduct are perceived as a threat and are dealt with by public relations officers, who are the company's specialists for information warfare. A PR officer is sent to the encampment after the doctor reports the writer's arrival to her superiors.

> 'Another blasted writer,' said the doctor, her voice rising. 'This could be a disaster … You're going to turn this woman [Mother; ann. RS] into an international bloody case.'
> 'I'm not using any names,' I said.

> […] 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But I must talk to her. Really.'
> The doctor shook her head.
> 'You are on thin ice,' she said. 'I've already called you lot in.' (*Mercy* 62)

The company and its representatives have no interest in investigating what has happened in the town. The atrocities conducted by the paramilitaries are a form of terrorism against the civilian population, but these are not directly ordered by the corporation's leadership. Violence against civilians is a result of the culture that the company harnesses in its military branch. The soldiers are encouraged to use any means necessary to either kill or forcibly displace the civilian population, but they are autonomous in their actions. Although terrorist acts are a logical consequence of the company's policies in the region, direct knowledge of such actions seems to be limited to the ones who conducted them. One of the company guards, who takes the writer to the town, openly admits to these actions.

> […] he grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the glass doors, then he waited until they were shut and he leaned forward, close to me, and he said in my ear, 'There's nobody there.'
> He glanced around the forecourt. 'Don't you know?' he said. He made a cutting motion across his throat. 'I am a guard,' he said, 'for the company. Don't you know? Even though there has been rain, the people … We have made sure they are all gone.' (*Mercy* 9)

Although the doctor is also employed by the company, she denies there having been any other civilians besides Mother in the town and, by implication, also denies the murders committed by company soldiers. Faced with Mother's testimony, she decides to dismiss it as a result of earlier psychological trauma unrelated to the company's presence in the area. She actively ignores any indications of crimes being committed by the corporation's soldiers.

> 'But what about what happened in the classroom?' I said.
> She looked up at me. Her eyes were huge and firm and empty as glass.
> 'What happened in the classroom?' she said.
> I tried to make my voice sound steady. 'The girls,' I said. 'The security guards …' I glanced back at the classroom. We fell silent. The doctor shrugged and put on a baffled expression. 'I've already called this whole lot in and they will send a plane. We just have to wait. That's what we are paid for – to work, and to wait.'
> 'But what about the girls?' I said.
> 'What girls?' said the doctor. (*Mercy* 61)

The journalist's and the writer's investigations threaten the credibility of the company's denial, which is why the doctor contacts the company to send a PR officer. Her intentions are in alignment with company interests and she is fully aware of the partisan role the officer fulfils. In a bout of anger over the writer's uncooperative attitude, the doctor's reaction initially indicates a violent response.

> I called for Mother again.
> When the doctor got to me, she grabbed me by the arms.

> ‘You know what we do with people like you?’ she said. Her fingers were hard. She squeezed down on my shoulders. […]
> ‘What do you do?’ I said. ‘You can’t do anything. I’ve been commissioned …’ (*Mercy* 62)

The PR officer, too, threatens the writer with violence at first. After his arrival, he immediately seeks out the writer and intrudes on her during her bath. Sexual violence is commonly practiced by the company’s soldiers in an effort to assert dominance. Also, the writer has previously been raped by a company guard and is again exposed to a company officer. During their first encounter, the PR officer is indicated to sexually threaten the writer. While she bathes in what used to be the town’s quarry, the officer intrudes on her.

> I was putting on my shoes when I saw a shadow pass over the ground behind me. I stood up and swung around. A man with a soft waxy face and very little hair stood looking at me with his arms crossed.
> ‘How long have you been here?’ I said.
> He shrugged. ‘Not long,’ he said. ‘Not long enough.’ He winked.
> I stepped back. (*Mercy* 78)

He also threatens her directly, suggesting that he would be “willing to risk it”, when she points that there would be negative repercussions if she were to “disappear” (*Mercy* 79). Speaking thereafter to the journalist, he suggests that she is not in danger of being killed, since she is backed by an international publisher. Without such support, reporters risk their lives for writing about abuses involving the company.

> ‘I met the PR guy,’ […] ‘It was like he was warning me,’ I said.
> He chuckled. ‘Well,’ he said. ‘He probably was.’
> […] ‘He can’t … you know, have me arrested or anything?’ I said.
> He turned around and his face was kind. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You have been commissioned by an international publisher, so you’ve got nothing to worry about. Writers like you can’t just disappear. That’s for the small guys like me.’ (*Mercy* 80)

Scrutiny by international media organisations is the only thing the company seems to fear. The goal behind the company’s public relations strategy is to conceal the conduct of its military branch, as well as the devastating effects of its business practices on the civilian population. Harming a writer, who investigates human rights violations in the name of an international publisher, would counteract this goal, as the disappearance would draw increased attention.

But journalism is not depicted as fundamentally positive. While investigative writers are the only ones who could hold the company to account, the novel also critically questions the partnership that has developed between the press and the corporate public relations departments. The public relations branch of the water company maintains deep connections to major international news outlets in order to influence which information is broadcast.

> We’ve cultivated good relationships with the major news channels,’ he said.

I nodded. I wasn't sure what to say.
'I'll be feeding them directly,' he said. 'As per protocol.' (*Mercy* 78)

In this instance, the story of the novel alludes to the cooperation between corporate public relations departments and the news media that is part of everyday news production. The author herself has been an active news journalist and points towards the interconnection between two seemingly opposing concepts, journalism and public relations. Journalism in the novel, as well as real life journalism, is heavily based on information packages that are provided by corporate PR departments. Lewis et al. (3) cites a public relations professional who estimates that in the United Kingdom "at least 60 per cent and more commonly 80 per cent of any broadcast or broadsheet outlet has got a PR element in it". Their aggressive opposition to the company allows both the journalist and the writer in the novel to create a narrative that is untainted by the propaganda campaign of the water company. But this opposition and uncooperative stance is also the reason they are subject to threats and violence. Investigative, independent journalism in the novel, be it in the form of classical news journalism or literary journalism, is what allows the company's victims to be heard and their stories to be publicised. Its role is to provide an opposing voice to the dominant, well connected, better funded public relations department.

All company employees that are given a voice in the novel are aware of the oppositional role of journalists. In the first scene, the driver inquires the writer's motives for travelling to the town and complains in the course about the journalists that are "always causing trouble" (*Mercy* 9). The only reason he agrees to cooperate with the writer is because she bribes him. The doctor, too, is actively promoting the company's narrative, as she claims she requested the company to "send in people who will write more accurately about what's going on" (*Mercy* 62).

The company employs a form of doublespeak to describe the favourability of reporting. Critical reporting is automatically reprehended as being biased against the company. The above mentioned statement that other journalists would report "more accurately", implies that the journalist's critical writing is unreliable or untrue. Bias in favour of the company is also not labelled as such, but rather categorised as being objective.

'I'm PR,' he said. 'I'm here to maintain the reputation of the company in this, but also, of course, to see that the truth be told.'
'I'm not quite sure what you mean,' I said.
He looked around, back at the tents. 'The recent web reports that have been coming out of here are, well … The company wants the news to be a bit more objective.'

> ‘That’s a bit of a contradiction in terms, isn’t it?’ I said. (*Mercy* 78)

7.9 Taking the side of the oppressed

The writer does not restrict herself to covering the story or even delivering a biased report. The overwhelming power of the company and the failure of governmental entities to work on behalf of the people leaves her with no other choice but to search for Eve herself. Shortly before Mother’s evacuation to a company-owned hospital, the writer takes on her quest by accepting the only physical proof the woman has of a company guard’s involvement in the girls’ deaths.

> I ran to her. I grabbed her hand. She pulled me close and spoke in my ear.
> ‘These people,’ she said. ‘They don’t see us. They do not see the girls. They do not believe there is one that remains. They do not see. And because of this they will make us ghosts in their histories.’
> ‘No,’ I said.
> ‘Find her,’ she said. ‘Find Eve.’
> I put my hand beneath her hand and she opened her fingers. It fell into my hand, the little piece of fabric, light as a vein in a feather but certain as the sun. And I held it tight, and I watched her go away. (*Mercy* 115)

Mother’s deportation would silence her and remove her from the public eye. Additionally, Eve would be left without support. The task of reporting on the incidents in the valley becomes secondary to the writer. She mentions in the beginning that the need to narrate the town’s story “weighed heavy” on her (*Mercy* 11), but when she leaves the camp after Mother’s deportation, the writer does not actually produce anything on the story and instead focuses on finding and helping Eve. She tracks the child’s movements to an orphanage that is overwhelmed by the influx of unaccompanied minors, especially girls, stemming from all across the country, which outlines the extent of this humanitarian crisis that was caused by the company. Instead of limiting herself to reporting on the country’s struggle with internal displacement, the writer decides to direct action and support this one specific victim. She finds out that Eve has been imprisoned for attacking and injuring a company guard. Although Eve is officially under the care of the non-profit organisation that runs the orphanage, the writer is the only one who visits her in prison to give her emotional support. In the course of Eve’s stay in prison, the writer evolves into the role of a surrogate mother. After she is released from prison, Eve stays at the writer’s apartment, where she is supplied with everything from clothing to sanitary towels. The writer’s support is not simply functional, but she manages to establish a deep emotional bond too.

Although she suffered through extremely traumatic events, she decides to share her experiences and inner thoughts with the writer.

> ‘Tell me what happened after you left,’ I said.
> ‘After I left the cave?’ she said.
> I nodded.
> She sighed. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I will tell you once, because you’re my friend.’ (*Mercy* 277).

The writer supports Eve unconditionally, even when she decides to seek out the now blind officer who was in charge of the attack on her town. She takes on the role of an advocate for the victim, as she unquestioningly facilitates access to the former guard’s apartment. Posing as a maid, Eve gains entrance to the apartment and is closely followed by the writer. She immediately begins to physically torture the guard with a knife, but is not stopped by her friend.

> Her eyes passed over me as if she did not recognise me. There was something else directing her acts, something that lived in memory and in dreams and in the vast plural spaces of the future, and I watched it in wonder, and I let it lead. (*Mercy* 269)

Unable to rely on the impartiality of the courts and the executive, the writer enables the victim to exert her own form of justice. She lets Eve be her own public prosecutor, confronting the officer with the severity of his crimes.

> ‘There is no living thing on this earth that does what you have done to us, none,’ she said. ‘You are speaking about men come together to hunt women and children because of this thing you are calling a war, when it is not a war at all but an invasion, a theft. And you are saying that there is purpose to it, and that it will end with victory. But what purpose? And where is the end? And where is the victory in all of this? […]’ (*Mercy* 271)

Eve is only one of many victims of sexual violence conducted by the company’s paramilitary branch. Newspaper reports are sparse, since the public is more interested in the security of the water supply than the human suffering its demand produces. The victims of the water company are powerless, faceless and voiceless, but with the writer’s support, Eve is able to reverse the balance of power between her and the guard, albeit only momentarily. As mentioned above, group dynamics allow the guards to ignore the profound immorality of their acts, but in the course of her interrogation, Eve forces the officer to share her experience.

> ‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘when your men were finished with me, when they had raped me, and cut me, and put a gun in me, they stood around me and they urinated on me?’
> Her voice steadied, grew louder.
> ‘Do you know that I was so thirsty that I opened my mouth so that I could drink it?’ she said.
> He shook his head. He shook it over and over.
> She put the knife in under his chin and she lifted his face up.
> ‘Look,’ she said. ‘Look at me.’ (*Mercy* 272)

8 Conclusion

What the three narrations have in common is an investigative focus on corruption by characters with a journalistic background. Essential elements of the state have been undermined and are no longer able to defend the population and enforce the law against the onslaught of the corrupt elites in politics and business. Journalism is therefore the only entity left in society to hold the powerful to account by uncovering and reporting on their actions. Journalists are the only remnants of a democratic societal structure, and it is with that role in mind that they report on the crimes that are enacted against the principal of a democratic state – the people. The novels depict a fight that national and international elites lead over the public narrative in order to undermine the democratic system of government that is contrary to their idology of profit maximisation.

9 Appendix

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9.2 German Abstract

Im Rahmen der Erzählungen fokussieren sich die Charaktere mit journalistischem Hintergrund auf den Themenbereich Korruption. Staatliche Akteure sind aufgrund der weitreichenden Aushöhlung ihrer Strukturen nicht mehr in der Lage die Bevölkerung zu schützen oder die korrupten Eliten aus Politik und Wirtschaft einer rechtssstaatlichen Verfolgung zuzuführen. Journalisten agieren daher als die einzigen Aufdecker von Missständen und Verbrechen, sind allerdings nicht in der Lage Konsequenzen zu setzen. Im Allgemeinen ist zu sagen, dass Journalisten in diesen gescheiterten Staaten die letzte Instanz für Gerechtigkeit sind. Sie bilden die letzten verbleibenden Elemente einer demokratischen Staatsidee, indem sie Missstände anprangern und den Souverän – das Volk – zu politischer Aktivität drängen. Die Romane zeigen den Kampf den korrupte nationale und internationale Eliten über die Vorherrschaft des öffentlichen Narrativs führen, denn eine demokratische Gesellschaftsordung steht ihrer Ideologie von Gewinnmaximierung im Weg.