



AN ECOSTYLISTIC APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN HELON HABILA'S OIL ON WATER

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Received: 09.02.2024

Reviewed :11.02.2024

Accepted: 14.02.2024

ABSTRACT

Previous studies on Helon Habila's Oil on Water have focused on the presentation of environmental issues, with little consideration given to how stylistic devices are used in the text to establish meaning. This study, therefore, investigates how meaning is negotiated in the text using certain stylistic elements. Extracts from Hellon Habila's Oil on Water serves as the data for the study. The study employs a qualitative research design as well as Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion theory as theoretical model in examining how the writer's mental schemata and lexical choices influence meaning in the text. The findings reveal that words cannot stand alone in a text because they are interconnected to form style and meaning. This was accomplished by the author's meticulous use of stylistic devices such as repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy, all of which improve the text's stylistic quality. The study concludes that the author used stylistic strategies to make reading the text meaningful and easy for the reader.

KEY WORDS: : Cohesive devices, ecostylistic, environmental degradation, Helon Habila.

1. Introduction

Prior to the discovery and exploration of oil and natural gas resources in the Niger Delta, life was simple with the people's mainstay primarily being fishing, farming and harvesting salt. Fishing and salt

boiling were natural occupations of the salt-water delta zone, and farming, along with fishing, in the freshwater region. But communal hunting seems to have served as a means of adding meat as variety to a fish diet (Albert et al., 2018; Aluya et al., 2019).

The oil industry has had a profound impact and has contributed greatly to the destruction of the environment globally. One of the most disastrous environmental catastrophes ensuing directly from oil drilling activities and their resultant risks was witnessed in the Nowruz oil fields during the Gulf war. Rinkesh Kukreja estimates that between 240 and 336 million gallons of crude oil flowed into the Persian Gulf during that period (Adebayo, 2019).

Oil extraction and degradation of the environment in Africa are not new, dating back to the colonial era. Oil was discovered in Nigeria in 1953, and drilling began in earnest in 1956 in the Oloibiri region of Bayelsa State. Nigeria and oil, therefore, share an unsettling history because oil is inextricably linked with the nation's colonization and subsequent patriotic and decolonizing movements. Despite the abundance of natural resources surrounding them, the majority of the residents in the oil-rich Niger Delta region live in abysmal poverty and long-term filth. To these individuals, oil is a curse rather than a blessing. The extraction and exploitation of oil unleashed a Pandora's Box of political, ecological, and social conditions, infecting the region with an epic scourge of human and environmental decadence (Vidal, 2010; Aluya & Ocheme, 2024).

The foregoing environmental concerns has prompted environmentalists in Nigeria (e.g., Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimum, Ken Saro Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide etc.) to use their discourses in various ways to give the natural world a stronger voice in human affairs. Apart from the above environmentalists, other recent Nigerian environmentalists such as

(Ogaga Okuyade, Emmanuel Egya Sule, Kaine Agary and Helon Habila) who have not been indifferently to this scenario, have equally raised awareness on environmental concerns through their creative responses with a view to portraying the enormity of the problem as well as recommending possible ways through which they can be fixed. Helon Habila, whose environmental text is the focus of this paper, is a prolific writer who has been concerned about the social, political, economic and environmental issues in Nigeria (Aluya & Adebayo, 2019). To this end, he has used his literary works as creative means to articulate a way of re-imagining the Nigerian environment that melds socio-economic existence with environmentalism. Also, he has called for a prioritization of green discourse for better leadership and socio-economic relations, as well as environmental sustainability. In order to give face to the invisible but palpable presence of capitalism on the Nigerian environment, Habila has turned to 'eco-novels' through which is an appendage to his aesthetic oeuvre. In all of Habila's literary works to date, he has given Nigerian political development a central place. But of all his works, it is *Oil on Water* that reverberates with environmental politics and its ancillary woes. This is why Habila's novel is selected for this study which approaches the text from an ecostylistics perspective with a view to determining how the writer's deployment of ecostylistic features contribute to the production of meaning in the text.

2. Conceptual Framework

Ecstylistics is an emerging field and the term itself was first used by Goatly at the PALA

conference (Goatly, 2010). Its main concern is to investigate connections between style and the natural environment in discourse. Broadly conceived as the air, water, and land inhabited by people, animals, and plants. Ecostylistics is defined as a fashionable approach that overlaps with ecolinguistics, ecocriticism, and stylistics (Zurru, 2017). Ecostylistics analysis can complement the ecocritical explanation of a literary text. Stylistic analysis is a way of associating linguistic forms with interpretation in a detailed way via reader inference and presenting explicit evidence against a specific explanation of text (Leech & Short, 2007, Aluya, 2016). Furthermore, ecostylistic concentrates on two perspectives, namely: First, the relation between the style of a literary text, physical environment, and linguistic representation. Second, the evaluation and investigation of ecological linguistic patterns in text, thereby contributing to increasing global environmental awareness. Ecostylistics has two main theoretical objectives. The first is environmental which deals with how landscapes and surroundings are portrayed in texts, whether they are literal or metaphorical. The second is ecological which is the study of the relationship between human and non-human participants as well as between humans and the physical environment (Zurru, 2017, Aluya & Ocheme, 2024).

3. Literature Review

This section of the study presents past research on the language of fiction or literary text genres from a stylistic perspective. Diana (2017), for example, examines Habila's *Oil on Water* and *Waiting from an Angel* through the lens of linguistic

stylistics. It aims to identify similar linguistic and stylistic elements in both texts, as well as the stylistic importance of Habila's stylistic choice. This study uses Leech and Short's model in analysing extracts randomly selected from the texts. The investigation demonstrates that Habila's writing style is consistent throughout. Except for a handful, every linguistic element and stylistic device explored in *Waiting for an Angel* appears to repeat itself in *Oil on Water*. Habila's style adheres to the concept of style, which views style as both a choice and a deviation. This investigation demonstrates that the text's style is reflected in its linguistic aspects. Finally, it indicates that the writer's style is consistent, as there are more recurring linguistic elements in both texts than there are variations.

Ojarike (2018) examines Habila's *Oil on Water* through a stylistic lens. The article uses Systemic Functional Grammar and Critical Stylistics as theoretical models. The findings show how the nominal group feature and the naming strategy are used to describe the reckless exploitation of petroleum resources in an underdeveloped region, as well as how the people of the Niger Delta have been impoverished and their environment degraded as a result of decades of exploitation and neglect.

Edokpayi (2019) examines Habila's *Oil on Water* from a Linguistic stylistic perspective. The paper focuses on the significant syntactic, lexico-semantic and graphological levels of language study. To this end, the paper seeks to expound how the writer deploys language resources to convey the Niger Delta crises, their security risks to the society

and the Nigerian economy as well as the decisive steps to arrest the ugly situation. The paper employs the linguistic stylistic as a theoretical framework in analyzing extracts purposively selected from the text. The findings indicate that syntactic features (declarative sentence, interrogative sentence, imperative sentence, exclamatory sentence, parallelism), lexico-semantic features (simile, metaphor, personification and idiomatic expressions) and graphological features (capitalization, ellipsis, use of pidgin) are used to portray the devastating effects of ecological degradation which has subjected the people of the region to a lot of problems ranging from environmental pollution, unemployment, poverty, hunger, diseases and deaths. The study concludes with Habila's call on the Nigerian government and the oil companies to give more attention to the Niger delta, and address the problems with all seriousness and urgency in order to restore peace and enhance national development in Nigeria.

Ojukwu and Gajir (2019) investigate Habila's *Oil on Water* in order to better understand the effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region. The study used Critical Discourse Analysis in conjunction with ecocriticism concepts to investigate passages from the novel via content analysis. The findings show that Habila used experienter constructs, laced with graphic descriptions of the harmful repercussions of oil spillage, to elicit emotions about the various degrees of environmental degradation and the negative effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. The breakdowns of grammatical structures in critical

discourse analysis broaden the scope of language beyond its formal structures to include modes that recreate social realities beyond the sentence level.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Halliday and Hassan's (1976) cohesion theory. The theory is appropriate for our investigation since it focuses on the link between lexical items in texts. A text is coherent when its pieces are connected and meaningful to the reader (Adagbonyin & Aluya, 2017). Cohesion happens when the interpretation of one item is dependent on another. Cohesion is concerned with both grammar and vocabulary. Halliday and Hasan (1976) provide four degrees of cohesiveness as rules for stylistic or linguistic analysis of any literary composition. The four types of cohesion are lexical, grammatical, phonological, and graphological. According to Adagbonyin and Aluya (2017), these dimensions of cohesiveness help to develop aspects of texts that are necessary for interpretation. The two types of cohesion are grammatical and lexical cohesion, but this paper focuses on the latter. Lexical cohesion evolves into a cohesive assertion across the text by using diverse terms to establish textual continuity (Adagbonyin & Aluya, 2017). According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), lexical cohesion is the most important contributor to textual cohesion, accounting for 40% of all cohesive devices. According to Aboh and Uduk (2017), lexical cohesion refers to the semantic network formed by the text's lexical elements. It has been considered the primary mechanism for bringing texts together experientially, and it differs from others in that it is not grammatical. Etuk and

Urujzian (2019) support this assertion by claiming that lexical cohesiveness is classified into five types: repetition, synonymy, antonymy, meronymy, and collocation. The current study uses lexical cohesion insights to demonstrate how language has been utilized to relate environmental issues in literary discourses.

5. Methodology

To analyse the data selected for this study, a qualitative descriptive and systemic methodology was employed. Firstly, the purposive sampling technique was adopted to collect data for this study. This technique was best suitable for the study because it gives room to study large spread-out data since doing so individually would be costly and time consuming or impossible. It allows creation of clusters with a smaller representation of the data being assessed with similar characteristics. The systemic method used include: selecting the data of analysis through close reading and identifying textual evidence containing eco-words; analysing the extracts qualitatively by means of textual analysis and discussing the results, drawing conclusions based on the findings of the analysis, and putting forward recommendations and suggestions for further research.

6. Textual Analysis and Discussion of Findings

In line with the objective of this study, this section seeks to examine Habila's *Oil on Water* for how lexical cohesive devices have been deployed in relating the issue of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region. This is with a view to demonstrating the nexus between style and the natural environment. The lexical cohesive devices

explored are synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and collocations.

6.1 Synonyms

Synonymy is a cohesive device that means similarity of meaning. It involves a "lexical relationship of close relatedness in the meaning of words" (Aluya, 2018: 99). The following are instances of Habila's utilisation of synonymy as a lexical cohesive device in the text. Extract 1) "Disappeared and swallowed" (p.3), extract 2). "Looking and gaze" (p.5), extract 3). "Camps and tents" (p.6) and extract 4). "Paradise and small village" (p.38). For example, in extract one, Habila speaks of the beauty and ambience of the Niger Delta region and employed the lexical items disappeared and swallowed to depict the obliterating of this beauty owing to environmental degradation. The lexical words in extract two are used to illustrate how Mr. Rufus and the boy exchanged facial contacts when the boy was lost in thought. As for extract three, the lexical items denote the hometowns of the Niger Delta inhabitants prior to the advent of the activities of oil company in the region. Observe the following pair of lexical items, *disappeared and swallowed* in (1), *looking and gaze* in (2), *camps and tents* in (3) and *paradise and small village* in extract four, they express the similar meaning by different words within the context of their usage in the text. The substitution of *disappeared* for *swallowed*, *looking* for *gaze* and *paradise* for *small village* serve to avoid repetition and monotony in discourse (Aluya, 2018). Habila accords prominence to precise

meaning in his text in order to reach a greater accuracy and avoid vagueness.

6.2 Antonymy

Antonyms are words with opposite meanings. They simply describe a lexical relationship that “exists between words that are opposites” (Aluya, 2018: 99). The use of antonyms is equally pronounced in the text. Some instances of this use include: extract 5). “Adventure and misadventure” (p.15), extract 6). “Move and stop” (p.18), extract 7). “Appeared and disappeared” (p.27), extract 8). “Dirty and white” (46), extract 9). “Light and darkness” (p.62). extract 10). “Life and death” (p.16). In extract seven, lexical items are utilised to allude the risky journey embarked on by Rufus and Zac to the territory of militants in search of the British woman who was kidnapped. Those in extract nine allude to locations in the regions inhabited by the oil operatives and the natives. While the location inhabited by the oil operatives have electricity, the reverse is the case in the location inhabited by the natives. One observes that the above set of words express a semantic relation that are opposite in meaning. The antonymous words are used to convey different message in the text. Antonyms serve as a means of generating contrast between these lexical items in the text. The contrast enables the reader to view the subject being discussed from both perspectives (Aluya, 2018).

6.3 Hyponymy

Hyponym refers to an umbrella term used in referring to class membership. It is a “relationship between the senses of lexical item of inclusion involving specific items or more general items”.

What this implies is that it is lexical relationship of meaning inclusion which also serves the purpose of lexical cohesion (Aluya, 2018: 222). Several instances of hyponyms are observed in the text under study. They serve for inclusive meaning and lexical cohesion. Some of these include: extract 11). “Cooking pot and water pots” (p.7), extract 12). “Women and children” (p.10), extract 13). “Soap and detergents” (p.10), extract 14). “Pots and pans” (p.24), extract 15). “Chairs, tables and filing cabinets” (p.30) and extract 16). “Deaf, dumb and blind” (p.34). For example, Habila alludes to villages in the Niger Delta region that have been abandoned by its inhabitants owing to the deadly epidemic caused by pollution from oil spills. The lexical items in extracts 11, 14 and 15 draw attention to some of the items that were abandoned in the various houses that had been deserted by the villagers. The lexical items *cooking pots* and *water pots*, *pots* and *pans* as well as *chairs*, *tables* and *filing cabinets*, which help to knit the text together (Aluya, 2018), serve to reinforce the idea about the desertion of the villages by the inhabitants. Here, the words *cooking pots*, *water pots*, *pots* and *pans* are co-hyponyms connected by their common inclusion under superordinate *kitchen utensils*. Conversely, *chairs*, *tables* and *filing cabinet* are co-hyponyms of furniture and equally serve to amplify the subject of the desertion of the villages by its inhabitants.

6.4 Collocation

Aboh and Uduk (2017) aver that collocation refers primarily to the sense of a connected discourse created by the close co-occurrence or relatively low frequency words that tend to appear

in similar contexts. In the same vein, Aluya (2018: 223) defines collocation as “the tendency of certain items in a language to occur close together”. From the foregoing definitions, it is obvious that a lexical item derives its meaning from other lexical items it is associated with in a longer structure (Aluya, 2018). Habila shows a great freedom of choice of collocational patterning. The following samples of collocation in the text under scrutiny reflect the creativity and diversity of his style: extract 17) “deadly epidemic”, p.7), extract 18) “empty squalor dwellings,” p.8), extract 19) “wielding whips and guns,” p.12), extract 20) “dwindling stocks of fish in the river,” p.16), extract 21) “kidnapped for ransom,” p.29), extract 22) “break the villagers resolve”, p.41), extract 23) “two white men”, p.42), extract 24) “the oil slick”,p.8), extract 25) “weeping-willing bamboos”, p.14), extract 26) “ancestral land”,p.39), and extract 27) “real kidnappers”p.31). Collocations, in the sample texts above, can be identified for content words (like adjective, adverbs and nouns) and functional words (like articles, demonstratives and pronouns) alike.

A close scrutiny of Habila’s text indicates that semantic expressions indicating collocation are a combination of nominal and verbal phrases. For example, in Habila’s text, collocational expressions in extracts 17) and 20) indicate one of the devastating effects of oil spills in the region. Extract 18) describes the poverty-stricken lives of the indigenes despite their abundance of resources. Extract 19) alludes to military’s terrorizing of the indigenes with ammunitions. Extract 26) refers to the indigenes’ claim of land ownership and extract

22) captures the efforts of the government to compel the villagers to sell their lands to the oil company operators.

Apart from the deployment of the above lexical cohesive devices, other lexical expressions in the data that capture the discourse subject of environmental degradation include: extract 28) “the opaque misty water” (p.19), extract 29) “a million different forms” (p.20), extract 20) “slippery and poisonous” (p.17), extract 31) “blackish water” (p.20), extract 32) “strange objects” (p.21), extract 33) “a dead fowl” p.20), extract 34) “black birds perching” (p.23), extract 35) “a human arm” (p.20), extract 36) “a community of ghosts” (p.8), extract 37) “an jute rope” (p.24), extract 38) “an entire village on stilts” (p.14), extract 39) “narrow passages” (p.14), extract 40) “the whole scarecrow settlement” (p.14), extract 41) “weeping willow bamboos and raffia palms” (p.14), extract 42) “disserted villages (p.96).

The water in the Nider Delta villages is described as *opaque and misty*. These modifiers present the Niger Delta problem as complex and intractable. The hyperbolic presentation of the variety of shapes of the water in *a million different forms*, further captures the complex web of water and creeks in the region. The water is erratic in shape and behaviour. Besides, the rivers are fast moving, *slippery and poisonous*, suggesting the contamination of the rivers by oil pollution. This fast-moving fresh water is suddenly replaced by *blackish water*. The modifier *blackish* suggests that the people have plenty of water which is useless for drinking. The lexical items *strange objects*, *a dead*

fowl, black birds perching and the *beckoning human arm* create an eerie spectacle and paint the picture of a people living in *a community of ghosts* using the words of the author. Here, we have the total picture of a naturally harsh environment. To add the scourge of oil is double tragedy. The variety and scope of modifiers and qualifiers used to describe the Head noun, *water* reflect different snapshots of the harsh environment. The metaphoric description of water as *an old jute rope* among others, indicates that the water is unpredictable and can unleash danger at any time.

Above all, the lexical expression, *an entire village on stilts* describes the nature of the settlements in the oil producing communities. The qualifier, “on stilts” describe how the settlements was suspended above water by sticks. The “modifier” and “qualifier” in “narrow passages of water”, imply that there is no earth below the houses. What ought to be streets in normal situations is actually water. The modifier, “scarecrow” shows that the houses are actually caricatures of normal settlements. The entrenched poverty of the people is further expressed by the image of the floating village expressed in nominal groups like, *an entire village on stilts’ ‘narrow passages of water.... like streets’, ‘weeping willow bamboos and raffia palms’, bits of zinc and plywood and cloth and ‘scarecrow settlement’*. The ‘deserted villages’ echoes Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village*, giving the impression of whole villages laid waste by petroleum exploration and exploitation. Military brutality is captured by *petrol drenching and demented patriotism*. To the major, pouring

petrol on the militants is patriotism, but the modifier *demented* shows that it is a strange type of patriotism.

Conclusion

The study has helped to spotlight the fact that linguistic cohesion constitutes the bits and pieces of stylistics which are combined meaningfully for linguistic expression and human communication to be realized. The critical point is that meaning is a distinctive element of stylistics and consequently plays a key role in the production of a literary text as a form of human communication. The study has also helped to call attention to the fact that the construction of a literary text (or any other text) is a conscious or deliberate process; hence, any meaningful linguistic construct achieved through the mental schemata of the writer, is a product of a deliberate patterning of stylistic choices within a specific contextual framework, which facilitates effective communication in Eco-Stylistics. Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* properly names and describes the situation in the Niger Delta. It is unusual for oil to be on top of water. Our sensibilities are immediately jolted to the realities of the Niger Delta situation. In the Niger Delta, oil indeed flows on water. The conflict between oil and water represents the conflict between Niger Deltans on one hand and the Federal Government and the International Oil Companies on the other. There is no doubt that the constant reproduction of these ideas has shaped the ideology of the people. The picturesque description of the environment by Helon Habila, gives a vivid picture of the landscape and the wanton destruction of the ecosystem. In addition to this, the people are

denied the benefits of their natural endowment. There is poverty and insecurity everywhere. The federal and state governments, together with the oil companies, have abandoned them. The people are cut off civilization. Under these circumstances, it is impossible for development to take place. All these have helped to rake up the ideology of resource control, which is like an article of faith in the Niger Delta. It is curious that Helon Habila, who is from Gombe State, is an impartial observer of the Niger Delta debacle.

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