



**NAMING AND DESCRIBING AS CRITICAL STYLISTIC DEVICES IN SELECTED  
NOVELS OF HELON HABILA AND DUL JOHNSON**

ORCID  
Connecting Research  
and Researchers

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5457-9255>

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0821-5853>

**RUTH DAVID**

Department of English and Literary Studies,

Bingham University, Karu

[ruth.david@binghamuni.edu.ng](mailto:ruth.david@binghamuni.edu.ng)

**ANOSIKE COMFORT ODOCHI**

Department of English and Literary Studies

Bingham University, Karu

[anosike-comfort.odochi@binghamuni.edu.ng](mailto:anosike-comfort.odochi@binghamuni.edu.ng)

Received: 07.02.2024

Reviewed :09.02.2024

Accepted: 11.02.2024

**ABSTRACT**

*This article analyzes Helon Habila's Waiting for an Angel and Measuring Time, as well as Dul Johnson's Across the Gulf and Deeper into the Night, using Lesly Jefferies' (2010) Critical Stylistic approach. The objective is to establish how both writers used the critical stylistic device of naming and describing to relate relevant sociopolitical situations in Nigeria. The qualitative study uses a descriptive method to analyze twelve extracts (3 from each novel) that were purposively chosen for the analysis. The findings reveal that the naming and describing technique is used in novels to package information, label characters' identities, and situate them in the social sphere. This technique also brings the reader's attention to the writers' ideological views. Finally, the creative implementation of the naming and describing device highlights ideologies such as religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, militarism, modern and traditional customs.*

**KEY WORDS:** : Critical stylistics, Dul Johnson, Helon Habila, literary discourse, socio-political themes.

**Introduction**

One of the appeals of many literary texts is the creative use of linguistic and literary devices to portray certain character types, highlight vital ideas, or paint specific images relevant to our cultural context and content. These linguistic and literary devices frequently express more than they literary

mean due to their structure (Aluya, 2016; Oyinkan, 2018). In agreement with this submission, Alagbe (2018) avers that a literary text, whether it be a play or a novel, has worth based on a variety of elements, including effective language use, successful characterization, pertinent thematic issues, and the offering of answers to societal problems. The novel,

which is the subject of this study, is an inventive prose tale of substantial length and some complexity that creatively explores human experience, typically through a connected series of events involving a number of people in a particular environment (Schwiebert, 2001).

The novel is one of the most common literary forms frequently used by authors to describe the social, political, and economic experiences of their societies (Agho, 2000). Commenting on the utilitarian nature of the form, most writers concur that while the novel is not the only effective way to reach a larger audience, its success comes from the fact that it can be utilised to accomplish many tasks (Alagbe, 2018). This may be the reason why the majority of Nigerian literary writers have used the form to expose the abnormalities that exist in their societies, such as the abuses of power by the ruling elite class, the ensuing issues of political instability, corruption, and other pervasive social ills like unemployment, poverty, and inequality (Ogunsiji & Aluya, 2022). Nigerian writers strive to convey in their literary works the realities and struggles that the neo-colonial system engenders as a result of the overwhelming failures in the political and social life of Nigerians. Among these writers are Dul Johnson and Helon Habila, whose artistic creations in Nigeria reflect a wide range of pertinent thematic issues. Dul Johnson and Helon Habila are famous Nigerian writers who commenced writing after Nigeria gained independence from British domination (Alagbe, 2018; Aluya & Edem, 2023).

Dul and Habila have created works that address the plight of the public as well as the

explanation of societal issues. The reality of Nigerian living situations and value systems in the past and present have continued to draw these writers' attention to the Nigerian society as a whole. Their artistic output reveals them to be the people's representatives and conscience. They use these works as a platform to address the injustices and anomalies committed in Nigerian society in an effort to suggest solutions. Both authors have amassed sufficient expertise in the writing industry and have been steadfast in using their gifts to promote social change in their respective societies (Aluya, 2021). The foregoing background falls in line with our assumptions that the novel provides avenue through which Dul Johnson and Helon Habila reconstruct the social concerns of their societies to suit their ideological positions. Despite the significant contributions of these writers to the social and political development of Nigeria, their artistic creations most especially *Deeper into the Night* and *Across the Gulf* for Dul have received little comprehensive scrutiny. To bridge this gap in research, the present study seeks to examine these novels from the perspective of Critical Stylistics. The objective is to determine how the naming and describing strategy has been deployed in the novels by these authors to relate pertinent issues that pertain to Nigeria socio-political space.

### Statement of the Problem

A number of linguistic or literary critiques have concentrated on Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time* as well as Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf* and *Deeper into the Night*. A few of these studies include: (e.g. Awolaja, 2019 &

Edokpayi, 2020 for *Measuring Time*); (e.g. Diana, 2017 & Lar, 2018 for *Waiting for ana Angel*); (e.g. Aluya & Edem, 2020 & Aluya, 2023 for *Across the Gulf*) and (e.g. Bussan, 2020 for *Deeper into the Night*). However, it appears that very few of them focused their writings on the link between linguistic choices and ideologies, particularly with regard to the styles and stylistic strategies deployed by both authors in the aforementioned works. To address this gap in literature, the present study examines the above literary works from the perspective of Critical Stylistics in order to determine how the naming and describing strategy has been deployed in relating pertinent socio-political concerns in the texts.

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the concept of naming and describing which is one out of the ten strategies introduced by Lesly Jeffries (2010) in her Critical Stylistic Model. Naming and describing is one of the theoretical approaches that form the configuration of Critical Stylistics. The idea of naming and describing in ideological terms puts the analyst's understanding of the English noun group's structure to the test. When naming an object, it uses the noun group and any other words that go with it. To "bundle up" thoughts and information that are not about entities but rather activities, processes, or events, noun groups are used ideologically in texts. The choosing of a noun or a noun to represent a referent is a step in the naming process. Such a choice suggests or supports a particular philosophy. Noun modification complement, which comes after naming, entails not only the choosing of nouns but also the application of noun modifiers (Jeffries,

2016). These noun modifiers are extra details that can be added to the nouns to modify them. A similar modification procedure and the employment of specific modifiers contains specific ideological potentials. Nominalization is the final naming strategy. This strategy entails changing a verb into a noun (Jefferies, 2010: 164).

### Research Methodology

This study, which is qualitative in orientation, adopts the descriptive method in examining the data selected for study. The data for the study are Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time* as well as Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf* and *Deeper into the Night*. Twelve (12) extracts (3 from each novel) were purposively sampled and selected for the investigation. The choice of the purposive sampling technique is hinged on the fact that it is flexible, simple and enables the study to select portions of the texts will assist in achieving the objective of the study. The portions of text selected are further subjected to critical analysis using insights from the naming and describing strategy. In the course of the analysis, the following acronyms: WFA (*Waiting for an Angel*), MT (*Measuring Time*), ATG (*Across the Gulf*) and DITN (*Deeper into the Night*) will be used to allude to the portions of texts analysed.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section sets out to examine the selected novels of Helon Habila and Dul Johnson for how the naming and describing strategy has been used in relating some socio-political concerns within the Nigerian space. In naming and describing, Habila and Dul ascribe names to entities in the discourse.

This stylistic strategy is employed in the data to package information, label identity, place characters in a social world and draw attention to certain ideological preferences of the writers. The following extracts illustrate the use of naming and describing strategy in Habila's texts.

**Extract 1.** Only security lights from poles shone at the sentry posts (WFA, 2002: pg. 21).

**Extract 2.** A mob wielding cudgels and cutlasses is hot on the heels of a youth who desperately crosses to the other side of the road narrowly missing the fender of a truck (WFA, 2002: pg. 48).

**Extract 3.** The Area boys captured a policeman and doused him in petrol and set him ablaze (WFA, 2002: pg. 80).

Extract [1] paints a social situation where citizens fundamental rights were violated by the military government. The thematic concern highlighted here is projected through the naming and describing strategy realised by the noun phrase "only security lights from poles...". Observe that the noun phrase begins with the adverb "only" and followed by the adjective "security" which functions to modify the noun phrase head "lights". The prepositional phrase "from poles" which is also a part of the noun phrase structure serve to qualify the headword "lights". The noun phrase expression in this extract stylistically functions to package information as well as draws attention to the authoritarian ideology which influences the military activities. The information packaged by the noun phrase structure relates to the sordid condition of the cell where innocent citizens were held captive as prisoners. From the foregoing social situation strategically painted by Habila, it

can be deduced that apart from the security light from the poles, all cells where prisoners were confined are pervaded with utter darkness.

Extract [2] captures one of the typical features of a failed state. Here, Habila employs the discourse of name-calling strategy to describe a typical Nigerian society where crimes, violence and lawlessness thrive unchecked. This is captured in the noun phrase "a mob wielding cudgels and cutlasses". The structure of this noun phrase is a combination of a deictic element "the", headword "mob" and qualifier "wielding cudgels and cutlasses". The deictic element pre-modifies the headword while the qualifier post-modifies it. The noun phrase structure in this extract functions to package information relating to the issue of violence perpetrated by some miscreants in Nigeria. Also, it highlights the ideology of religious extremism which promotes dehumanization and decapitation of people based on religious affiliations. It is this ideology that prompts the mob to arm themselves with weapons to perpetrate violence. In this extract, Habila strives to remind the reader that in a functional society where the government is in control and law enforcement agencies are efficient; crimes, violence and lawlessness are checked and miscreants are not allowed terrorize the masses.

Extract [3] centers on students' life and protest. It relates the police's murder of some university students owing to their peaceful demonstration against the tyranny and failure of the military government. Also, it captures the hijacking of the protest by some youths. The naming strategy used in this text is realised through the nominal

expression, “The Area Boys”. It is employed by Habila to label the kind of youths who hijacked the protest from the university students and murdered a policeman in retaliation for the death of the university students. The nominal group structure consists of the definite article, “the”, a deictic element functioning to indicate the identity of the noun “boys” serving as the nominal group head. The adjective, “area” preceding the nominal group head is an epithet performing descriptive function in that it adds meaning to the nominal group head. Through the naming and describing strategy, the extract foregrounds the ideology of radicalism that requires desperate measure such as force in bringing about change in the society.

Apart from *WFA*, Habila employs naming and describing strategy in *MT* to relates thematic concerns which are germane to Nigeria’s socio-political milieu. The sample texts that follow illustrates the stylistic utilisation of this strategy.

**Extract 4.** The song, a ballad that gives in detail and complexity with each rendition in the moonlit village square, called Lamang the “King of women,owner of ten women in every village from Ketu to the state capital (MT, 2007pg. 15).

**Extract 5.** The Old witch, Nana Mudo, lived alone with her dog on the other edge of the grove (MT, 2007: pg. 28).

**Extract 6.** The military, after decades of systematically running the country into the ground, had at last handed over power to the civilians, and one of the first promises made by the local politicians was to bring electric power to Ketu (MT, 2007: pg.87).

Two different naming choices are observed in extract [4]. They are exemplified in the nominal phrases “The King of women” and “Owner of ten women”. These are nominal phrases in appositions. The first nominal phrase comprises the definite article “The”, noun “king” and prepositional phrase “of women”. Conversely, the second is a combination of the noun “owner” and a prepositional phrase “of ten women”. In the first nominal phrase, the definite article functions as a deictic element to introduce the headword while the prepositional phrase functions as a qualifier to supply additional information to it. Similarly, the headword in the second nominal phrase is equally complemented by the prepositional phrase which serves as a qualifier to provide essential information to it. The naming and describing strategy used in this extract functions to place Lamang in the social world where he belongs. Habila employs the discourse of name-calling through noun phrase in apposition to strategically describes the promiscuous lifestyle of Lamang. This is with a view to drawing attention to the patriarchal ideology which most men in Africa leverage on to have multiple partners.

The discourse of name-calling through nominal phrase in apposition is equally demonstrated in extract [5]. It is seen in the expression “The old witch, Nana Mudo”. The first nominal phrase is a combination of the definite article “the”, adjective “old”, and noun “witch”. The definite article and adjective aptly describe the noun which is the headword. Similarly, the second



nominal phrase consists of two nouns, “Nana” and Mudo”. It is deployed to bring more detail into the first nominal phrase. The detail provided by the second nominal phrase uncovers the identity of the referent that has been withheld in the first nominal phrase. The nominal phrase in apposition as deployed by Habila in extract [5] is appropriately reflective of the African ideology in the existence of witchcraft.

In extract [6], the naming strategy is achieved through a full nominal phrase modification. This is captured in the expression “The military after decades of systematically running the country into the ground”. The nominal phrase structure comprises the definite article “the”, noun “military” and prepositional phrase complex “after decades of systemically running the country into the ground”. Observe that three propositional phrases serve as the qualifier in the nominal phrase structure. They are “after decades”, “of systematically running the country” and “into the ground”. The crux of the nominal phrase structure lies in the prepositional phrase complexes due to the essential details they bring into the nominal phrase head. Habila’s choice of utilizing prepositional phrase complexes is in [6] is to stylistically describe the maladministration of the military government in Nigeria. From the foregoing analysis, it can be deduced that the discourse of name-calling strategy in Habila’s *WFA* and *MT* is achieved through a partial and complete noun phrase modification as well as noun phrases in appositions. These nominal phrases are stylistically deployed to reflect different ideologies such as

patriarchy, authoritarianism and religious extremism.

The second phase of the analysis under this section captures the stylistic utilisation of naming and describing strategy in Dul Johnson’s *ATG* and *DITN*. The following extracts illustrate the deployment of this critical stylistic strategy in *ATG*.

**Extract 7.** The aerial bombardment of Okigboli had commenced (ATG,2017: pg. 10).

**Extract 8.** Those Awusas were beasts, flogging women naked and in the open, using it to satisfy their pervasions (ATG, 2017: pg. 31).

**Extract 9.** The culture of hoisting a bloodied white cloth to prove the bride’s sanctity was no longer in vogue (ATG, 2017: pg.87).

Naming and describing strategy in extract [7] are achieved through the nominal phrase, “The aerial bombardment of Okigboli”. The structure of this nominal phrase is a full modification consisting of pre-modificatory and post-modificatory items. The pre-modificatory items consist of the definite article “the”, adjective “aerial” and noun “bombardment”. Conversely, the post-modificatory item includes the prepositional phrase “of Okigboli”. The pre-modificatory and post-modificatory elements serve to modify the noun phrase head by supplying additional meaning to it. This is achieved through the functions of identification, description and complementation performed by these elements. For instance, the definite article “the” identifies the nominal phrase head while the adjective “aerial” modifies it by describing the kind of attacks carried out by the Nigerian forces against their opponents. Also, the prepositional phrase “of Okigboli” is an

adverb of place denoting the location where the attacks occurred. Dul's choice of the prepositional phrase "of Okigboli" is representative of the Biafran territory.

In extract [8], the naming strategy foregrounds the character trait of the Awusas. Dul, while commenting on this character trait, describes the Awusas' inward cravings to perpetrate violence and therefore label them as beast. This inward craving for violence is influenced by their ideology of religious extremism. The structure of the nominal phrase in extract [8] is a combination of the determiner "those" and noun "Awusas". The determiner serves as a deictic element to introduce the noun which is the headword of the noun phrase. The nominal phrase head uncovers the identity of the referent being referred by Dul. Other lexical items that perform descriptive functions in extract [8] are "beasts" and "flogging". While the first lexical item uncovers the identity of the Awusas, the second foregrounds their destructive acts. The nominal phrase structure together with the lexical items bring to fore the themes of religious crisis which end up making females becoming victims of males' violence.

The naming strategy in extract [9] is exemplified in the nominal expression, "The culture of hoisting a bloodied white cloth to prove the bride's sanctity". The nominal phrase structure begins with the definite article "the", a deictic element indicating the noun phrase head "culture". This is followed by the qualifying element "of hoisting a bloodied white cloth to prove the bride's sanctity". The qualifying element is a prepositional

phrase complex performing complementary function to the nominal phrase head. The crux of the discourse theme in this text is embedded in the nominal phrase head as well as the qualifying element. While the nominal phrase head foregrounds the traditional practice of young women maintaining chastity until marriage, the qualifying element describes the manner in which such chastity was ascertained.

Apart from ATG, Dul employs naming and describing technique in *DITN* to relates social concerns which are germane to Nigeria's socio-political environment. The sample texts that follow illustrates the stylistic utilisation of this strategy.

**Extract 10.** Retired Sergeant Domyil, the ex-soldier in charge of the Vigilante, summoned his men (*DITN*, 2014: pg. 108).

**Extract 11.** Old Gwangtim was not surprised, and he warned Nimfa strongly several time (*DITN*, 2014: pg. 11).

**Extract 12.** A powerful herbalist in Zangya's village, madly in love with her had spent quite a few goats and chickens before Tyem Zhimak, younger, wealthier and more handsome came into her life (*DITN*, 2014: pg.15).

Extract [10] refers to the leader of the local vigilante group organized by the Gwangtim elders to protect their community from incessant attacks by neighboring villages. The naming strategy in this text is achieved through appositive nominal phrases as exemplified in "Retired Sergeant Domyil, the ex-soldier in charge of the vigilante". The first nominal phrase structure comprises the adjectives "retired and sergeant" and the noun, "Domyil". Conversely,

the second consists of the definite article “the”, noun “ex-soldier” and prepositional phrase complex “in charge of the vigilante”. The adjectives in the first nominal phrase as well as the prepositional phrase complex in the second function collaboratively to complement the nouns “Domyil” and “ex-soldier”, both serving as headwords in the structures. The complementary function performed by these elements is descriptive in nature. Whereas the adjectives are suggestive of the years of experience garnered by Domyil in the military, the prepositional phrases indicate his status as the leader of the group. Through the naming strategy in this text, Dul portrays the subject of inter-ethnic crisis in Plateau state and Nigeria which has led to the destruction of innocent lives and properties.

Extract [11] captures the leadership style between two generations which are represented by the discourse of name-calling. Two names employed in this text are Old Gwangtim and Nimfa. The former is the father of the latter. The nominal phrase “Old Gwangtim” denotes one generation (tradition) while his son, Nimfa symbolizes another (modern). Through the discourse of name-calling, Dul portrays the clash between tradition and modern ideas. Old Gwangtim is a traditional man who applies traditional ideas in his reign as the leader of the Gwangtim community. During his reign, the people live peacefully as disputes were resolved amicably. However, Nimfa, who is a modern man, is the opposite of his father.

Extract [12] begins with a complete nominal modification as captured in “A powerful herbalist in Zangya’s Village”. This modification comprises pre

and post modification elements. The premodification items consist of the deictic item “a”, the epithet “powerful” and the headword “herbalist”. The deictic element functions to introduce the headword which is further described by an epithet. The pronominal reference “her” in this text refers to Zangya. The premodification is succeeded by a post modification constructed using the prepositional phrase “in Zangya’s village”. The naming and describing strategy in this text serve descriptive functions in that it is indicative of the powerful herbalist who after spending a fortune on Zangya was jilted by her. From the analysis conducted on Dul’s texts, it can be deduced that the discourse of name-calling strategy in Habila’s *WFA* and *MT* is achieved through a partial and complete nominal phrase modification as well as appositives nominal phrases. These nominal phrases are stylistically deployed to reflect different ideologies such as religious extremism and modern versus traditional practices.

As the foregoing analysis has shown, the naming and describing strategy in both data is realised through premodification and postmodification elements. These premodification and postmodification items include the nominal phrases, prepositional phrases, deictic element, prepositional phrase complex, nominal phrase in apposition and epithet. They serve as Critical Stylistic strategy deployed in the data to package information, label the identity of characters, place characters in a social world and draw attention to certain ideological preferences.

## Conclusion



An attempt has been made in this paper to examine Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time* and Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf* and *Deeper into the Night* from a Critical Stylistic perspective. The objective of the study was to determine how both writers deploy the Critical Stylistic device of naming and describing in relating pertinent socio-political concerns within the Nigerian space. Naming and describing strategy in the selected novels were realised through premodification and postmodification items. The premodification items include nominal phrases, appositive nominal phrases, deictic element. Conversely, the postmodification items comprise prepositional phrases and prepositional phrase complexes. These premodification and postmodification items are deployed to package information relating to Nigeria's socio-political concerns such as the failure of the military administration, religious extremism, adverse impact of conflicts in Nigeria and traits of bad leadership. Also, the strategy of naming and describing functions in labelling the identity of characters described in the texts. The paper concludes that naming and describing as one of Lesly Jefferies' Critical stylistic strategies enables writers to underscore their ideological preferences in texts.

### References

1. Agho, J.A. (2000). *Themes and trends in the literature of black diaspora*. Warri: Cuba Publishers.
2. Alagbe, J. (2018). Language and social status in Wole Soyinka's *The Beautification of Area*
3. *Boy*: A stylistic approach. In A. Osisanwo., I. Olaosun & I. Odebode (Eds.), *Discourse-*
4. *Stylistics, Sociolinguistics and Society*. 37-57. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers Ltd.
5. Aluya, I. (2016). 'Still in the Woods': A Stylistic Reading of Osundare's Essays. *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies*. 8(2): 187-208.
6. Aluya, I. (2021). Grammatical Deviation in Niyi Osundare's Essays as a Tool for Foregrounding Sociopolitical Challenges in Nigeria. *Uturu Journal of Language and Linguistics*. 119-130.
7. Aluya, I. and Edem, S. (2020). Discourse Dimension of Dominance Relations in Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf*. *International Journal of Language and Communication*. 7 (1): 250-270.
8. Aluya, I., & Edem, S. (2023). Language Techniques and Literary Devices for National Messaging in President Buhari's Democracy Day Speech. *Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*, 13, 4-17.
9. Aluya, I. (2023). Linguistic Manifestation of Modality in Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf*. *Dutsinma Journal of English and Literature*, 7(1), 161-179.
10. Awolaja, A.A (2019). Form and content: An analysis of Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*. *Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies*, 9, 29-40.
11. Awolaja, A.A. (2019). A pragmatic representation of conflict in Helon Habila's

- Waiting for an Angel. Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 6, 53-68.
12. Bassan, R. (2020). Foregrounding as stylistic devices in Dul Johnson's *Deeper into the Night*. *International Journal of Humanitatis Theoreticus*. 4(1); 117-127.
  13. Diana, A.A. (2017). A linguistic stylistic study of Helon Habila's *Waiting for An Angel* and *Oil on Water*. *Journal of Communication and English Studies*, 2(1), 94-109.
  14. Dul, J. (2014). *Deeper into the night*. SEVHAGE Publishers.
  15. Dul, J. (2017). *Across the gulf*. Makurdi: SEVHAGE Publishers.
  16. Edokpayi, J.N. (2019). Graphological patterning in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*. *International Journal of English and Studies*. 2 (9), 80-94.
  17. Habila, H (2002). *Waiting for an Angel*. London: Penguin, Print.
  18. Habila, H (2007). *Measuring time*. London: Penguin, Print.
  19. Jeffries, L. (2010). *Critical Stylistics: The power of English*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
  20. Jeffries, L. (2016). Critical Stylistics. In S. Violeta. (ed.), *The Bloomsbury companion to stylistics* (157-175). London: Bloomsbury.
  21. Lar, P. D. A. (2018). *Linguistics stylistic study of Helon Habila's Waiting for an Angel and Measuring Time* (Doctoral dissertation, PhD dissertation, Submitted to, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria).
  22. Ogunsiji, A. and Aluya, I. (2022). *Lexical Repetition and Syntactic Parallelism in Selected Political Essays of Niyi Osundare and Ray Ekpu*. *The Universal Journal of Language*. 23(1): 77-107.
  23. Oyinka, M. (2018). Proverbs and metaphors at the crossroads: The example of Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*. In A. Osisanwo; I, Olaosun & I, Odebode (Eds.), *Discourse-Stylistics, Sociolinguistics and Society*. 9-21. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers Ltd.
  24. Schwiebert, J.E. (2001). *Reading and writing from literature*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.