

The Paradox of Underdevelopment in the Niger Delta: A Critical Stylistic Study of the Nominal Group in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

Petroleum, which God blessed Nigeria with through His endowment of the Niger Delta, has become a curse rather than a blessing. This paper looks at how Nigeria, through her brazen and reckless exploitation of petroleum resources, underdeveloped the Niger Delta. Specifically, it examines how Helon Habila uses the Nominal Group to this effect. The theoretical framework for the study is Critical Stylistics, while the grammatical model is Systemic Functional Grammar. The findings show that the Nominal Group has been used appropriately to reveal how the people of the Niger Delta have been impoverished and their environment degraded from decades of exploitation and neglect.

Keywords: The Nominal Group, Critical Stylistics, Systemic Functional Grammar, Exploration and Exploitation

Introduction

The political economy of Nigeria's first republic was characterized by regional autonomy, federalism, and resource control. There was a healthy competition among the regions with the Northern Region specializing in groundnut production, hides and skin, and associated industries. The Eastern and Midwestern Regions concentrated on palm oil and rubber products, while the Western Region focused on cocoa and allied products. After the 1966 coup d'état, the military suspended the federal constitution of 1963 and ruled by decrees and edicts. This signalled the end of the incentive-based, co-operative and symbiotic economic system under the federal constitution. The development trajectory that started with the 1963 constitution was thus halted (Ojarikre, 2015).

An unfortunate coincidence of Nigeria's economic history was that this period of military adventurism marked the beginning of the oil boom. The military could not manage the new-found wealth. Nigeria's common patrimony was gradually frittered away by successive military and civilian regimes. The economy was awash with "petro-dollars". The sad consequence of this was that with the easy money from oil, the fledgling agrarian economy and the nascent industrial sector were neglected. There was a brazen and reckless exploitation of petroleum resources without consideration for environmental impact assessment. This period marked the beginning of underdevelopment in Nigeria in general, and the Niger Delta in particular (Ojarikre, 2015).

The groundswell of discontent, which later transmuted into intellectual activism by the likes of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was martyred by the struggle, later snowballed into open protests, defiance, vandalism of oil installations, hostage taking, and militancy. The intellectual arm of the struggle gave birth to a corpus of literature called Niger Delta eco-critical literature. The genre that is the subject of this study is prose fiction. Helon Habila is one of the writers that emerged from the eco-critical tradition. His narrative, *Oil on Water*, looks at the problem of insecurity in the Niger Delta. In the process, other eco-critical issues like environmental degradation and its negative effects are raked in. The paper, therefore, examines how Helon Habila uses the Nominal Group to reflect the situation in the Niger Delta, using the critical-stylistic feature of Naming and Describing.

Ecocriticism

Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Howarth (1996) looks at the origin and morphology of ecocriticism. "Eco" and "Critic" both derive from Greek "oikos" and "kritis", which together mean "house judge". Ecocritic could therefore mean a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature. Ecocritical studies have also been enhanced by the formation of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) which has grown from a "localized North American ferment into a thousand-member organization with chapters worldwide from the UK to Japan

and Korea to Australia – New Zealand” (Buell, 2005; Armbruster and Wallace, 2001; Tosic, 2006, Emama & Maledo, 2018).

Guattari (2000) warns that we are at the brink of ecocide because of the way we have challenged the earth. Williams contrasts the country and the city as it relates to English culture and civilization. In the same vein, the displacement and deprivation of rural people by modernization is considered as oppressive and a threat to the environment (Howarth, 1998 & Clark 1988). Ziser draws attention to the increasing use of fossil fuel and the impending danger to the environment if environment friendly alternatives are not sought. The devastating effects of oil exploration and exploitation are also discussed (Watts, 2014 & Wenzel, 2014). McColley, (2001) considers the issues in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and posits that they are still present in environmental discourse. Siddall, (2009) looks at landscape and literature by analyzing extracts that cut across English literary tradition in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Hopkins, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley and others.

Tanure Ojaide (2013) says that ecocriticism has to do with ecologically sensitive creative writing and criticism. He observes health hazards from methane and other chemicals which contaminate the air, land and water. Gabriel Okara in *The Call of the River Nun* and J.P. Clark in “Night Rain”, among other such works, present the difficult Niger Delta land and seascape (Nwoga, 1967 & Senanu and Vincent, 1976). Okuyade (2016), commenting on Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, addresses displacement, dislocation, loss of identity by micro-minority, and slow violence as postulated by Nixon (2011). He also examines, among others, distortions in the Niger Delta. He paints the picture of a vanishing world and landscape. Actual ecological awareness started with Tanure Ojaide’s *Labyrinths of the Delta* and Niyi Osundare’s *The Eye of the Earth*. Ojaide (1986) laments the destruction of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta; while Osundare (1986) bemoans the destruction of virgin forests from capitalist encroachment.

Armbruster and Wallace (2001) drawing from the conferences of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment), identify areas of study under ecocriticism to include: Ecocritical Approaches to Multicultural Literature; African American Fiction; Green Cultural Studies; Urban Environments and Urban Nature;

Environmental Justice; The Natural World in Early America; Postmodernism and the Environment; and Nature and Religion.

This paper looks at ecocriticism from the perspective of environmental justice in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

Critical Stylistics

Critical Stylistics is an ideology-based theory. Jeffries (2010) sees ideology as those ideas that are shared by a community or society. They are reproduced, re-asserted and reaffirmed by dominant groups in the media and texts to the extent that they become naturalized as self-evident or common sense. This is how the ideology of resource control evolved in the Niger Delta. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is one of the texts that have contributed to propagating this ideology.

Ye (2010) examines the opposing views of Tibet and China on the issue of independence for Tibet and concludes by revealing how ideological consequences might lead the reader/hearer to make certain conclusions that could support the speaker's point of view in news reports. Dorpar (2012) looks at a short story by Jashn-e Farkhonde and suggests that the use of swear words and imperative sentences indicate the hidden ideology of the text, which exposes the dissatisfaction of intellectuals in Persia with the social and political currents mentioned in the story. Alaghbary (2014) explores ideological embedding in United States' presidential rhetoric on aggression and conflict. Specifically, he examines Obama's first official statements on each of the 2011 popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria. The conclusions reveal how Obama's ideological attitudes and assumptions are embedded in the structure of his statements. This paper considers how the ideological attitudes of the Niger Delta people are embedded in the Nominal Group as captured by Helon Habila in *Oil on Water*.

Methodology

Data for the study

Data for this study are selected from Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The text has two natural divisions: parts 1 and 2. Extract 1 narrates how two journalists, Zaq and Rufus go in search of the kidnapped Mrs. Floode; while extract 2 gives an account of their arrival on Irhikefe Island and the

escape story. The extracts are selected on the basis of ecosensitivity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is Critical Stylistics. Critical Stylistics is a fusion of Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. Jeffries (2010) examined the texts and concepts in Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis and brought them under a compendium called Critical Stylistics. She states her intention as:

1. giving the reader a clear set of analytical tools for critical analysis of texts, with the aim of uncovering or discovering the underlying ideologies of texts; and
2. providing an explanation of the cognitive processes which may result in readers being affected by a texts ideological structure.

The Nominal Group (NMG) as theorized by Jeffries is called Naming and Describing. It is an exploration of how English texts name the world. It is also based on how choices for naming and describing are made from the available resources of the language against a background of their ideological effects.

Naming can be done in any of the following ways to create ideological meaning;

1. a noun is chosen from the available alternatives.
2. any other information included in the noun group or phrase is considered; and
3. the processes and actions usually described by verbs may be converted into nouns by a process called nominalization with certain ideological consequences.

The expression on our faces, according to Jeffries (2010), when we are happy can be expressed with a 'smile' or a 'leer', depending on the kind of meaning we want to express.

He gave a *smile. neutral*

He gave a *leer. negative.*

She explains that in the second case, the impression of the writer is expressed. This makes it ideological; while the first one is neutral. The ideological potential in naming is not only in making a reference to

somebody or something, but also in expressing an opinion of that thing. The part of the sentence that names an entity, semantically referred to as actor or goal, can be premodified by adjectives and postmodified by prepositions and relative clauses (Jeffries 2010). In the extracts, the Nominal Groups that are ideological are italicized and analysed.

Grammatical Model

Systemic Functional Grammar is used for analysis. This grammar has its roots in Scale and Category Grammar. It was developed by M.A.K. Halliday in the late fifties. The grammar was also influenced by insights from the works of Firth in the 30s, 40s and 50s. Halliday (1961) developed his model in an article titled, “Categories of the Theory of Grammar”. It sees language as a social activity that can be explained in terms of meanings inherent in the social system. It thus emphasizes language function. In this way, it looks at the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of language. (Lamidi, 2000 & Ayeomoni, 2007). This model of grammar is used for the following reasons:

- a. Systemic Functional Grammar emphasises meaning and communication.
- b. In systemic grammar, emphasis is on acceptability rather than grammaticality.
- c. It is context based and emphasises the sociological aspects of language (Lamidi 2000 & Berry 1977).

At the level of delicacy, the NMG has the MHQ structure. M is modifier; H is head; while Q is qualifier. Within the clause, SPCA is the usual form where S is subject, P, predicator, C, complement and A, adjunct (Adejare 1996, Lamidi, 2000 & Ojarikre, 2013). Adejare and Adejare (1996) identify the possible patterns under the MHQ Structure.

SN	STRUCTURE TYPE	(M)	H	(Q)
1	MHQ	Famous	Ojo	of Ibadan
2	HQ	-	Ojo	of Ibadan
3	MH	Famous	Ojo	-
4	H	-	Ojo	-

This shows that M and Q are optional elements, while the H is the only obligatory element of structure.

Data Analysis

Helon Habila: *Oil on Water*

It would be illuminating to start by analyzing the title of Helon Habila's novel as shown below.

H Q
Oil/on Water

The title, as a nominal group, immediately sets the tone for what to expect. The conflict begins with oil on water: irreconcilable adversaries, as it were. The head noun, 'Oil' and its post-modifier, 'on Water' cannot mix. By the same token, the people of the Niger Delta cannot be reconciled with the Federal Government and the International Oil Companies under the present situation. The symbolism of the HQ structure is the picture of a naturally difficult terrain exacerbated by massive environmental degradation.

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is the story of the experiences of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, who go in search of the kidnapped wife (Isabel Floode) of an expatriate staff of one of the oil companies in the Niger Delta. Their journey is an odyssey of sorts, reminiscent of African folktales where a legendary figure travels through the land of spirits to fetch a beautiful damsel or to retrieve a hidden treasure. This provides a lens to have a composite picture of the hostile, harrowing and horrendous Niger Delta land and seascape. In the process, issues of environmental degradation, poverty, insecurity (kidnapping), oppression, and exploitation, among others, are brought to the fore. We have the total picture of a naturally harsh environment troubled and worsened by oil exploration and exploitation. The novel is divided into two major sections based on the two parts of the novel. Extracts are then purposively selected for analysis and interpretation. Extract 1 is (The Search For Mrs. Floode and Arrival on Irikefe Island) Chapters 1-7. Extract 2 has to do with (Experiences on Irikefe Island and the Escape Story) Chapters 8-20. The following extracts selected on the basis of

relevance, show how Naming and Describing as a critical stylistic tool reveals the ideology of resource control.

Extract 1(a)

the	opaque	misty	water	The water took on
M	M	M	H	
a	million	different	Forms as we glide on it	
M	M	H		
Sometimes	It	was a <i>snake</i>	Twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous	
M	H	Q	Q	
Sometimes	It was	an old jute		
M	H	M		
rope	frayed and wobbly	and breaking into	jagged	feathery
H	Q	Q	M	M
ends	The	Fresh	Water	abruptly replaced by
H	M	M	H	M
thick	Marshy tract	Of mangrove	Standing over still	brackish
M	M	H	Q	M
water	strange	objects Would float past us;	a	piece
H	M	H	M	M
of cloth	a	rolling	log	a
H	M	M	H	M
dead	Fowl,	a	bloated	dog,
M	H	M	M	H
belly up	with	black	birds perching on it	Once
H	Q	M	H	
we	saw	a human arm	... its fingers opening and beckoning	

Discussion of 1(a)

The water 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. The water being a snake suggests the winding nature of rivers and their tributaries. Besides, the rivers are fast moving, “slippery and poisonous”, suggesting that the Niger Delta problem is difficult to handle; while the environment is dangerous. This fast-moving fresh water is suddenly replaced by “brackish water”. The modifier “brackish” shows that the people have water everywhere but do not have any to drink. This reminds us of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s lines:

Water, water, everywhere
Nor any drop to drink

in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”.

The modifiers and qualifiers in nominal groups like “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”.

In this extract, 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, shows that the water is unpredictable and can unleash danger at any time.

Extract 1(b)

M	M	M	M	H	M	M	M	M
The next village was almost a replica of the last:	the	same	squat	dwellings	the	same	ripe	And
M	M	M	H	M	M	H	M	M
flagrant	Stench,	the	barrenness	the	oil	slick	and	the
M	M	H	Q	Q	M	H	Q	
same	indefinable	sadness	in the air	As if	a	community	of ghosts were suspended	
M	M	M	M	H				
above	the	punctured	zinc	roof				

Discussion of 1(b)

The modifiers in the nominal group, “empty squat dwellings,” paint the picture of abandonment. As it were, the people are vagrants living in abandoned houses. By extension, the people of this oil rich region have been abandoned by the Federal Government and the international oil companies. The modifiers, “ripe” and “flagrant” describe a smelly environment from pollution. The environment has also been rendered barren, implying that the people cannot fish and cultivate. This results in an atmosphere of sadness. The zinc roof, as shown by the modifier, is punctured, suggesting that when rain falls, the roof leaks as painted by J.P. Clark in *Night Rain*.

The nominal groups give a sense of emptiness, barrenness, putrid smell and a people living in a ghost town, cut off civilization: inconsequential like Ibiwari Ikiriko’s ‘Minority Man’. There is an increasing sense of poverty. There is a descent from poverty to penury.

Extract 1(c)

M	M	H	Q	M	H
It was <i>an</i>	<i>entire</i>	<i>village</i>	<i>on stilts,</i>	narrow	Passages
Q	M	H	H	Q	H
of water	divided	one	row	Of huts from the rest, like streets	The houses were made from
M	H	M	H	M	H
<i>weeping-willow</i>	<i>bamboo</i>	<i>and raffia</i>	<i>palms</i>	<i>and bits of</i>	<i>Zinc and it seemed anything else the builders were able to lay their hands on</i>
M	H	Q			
The whole <i>scarecrow</i>	<i>settlement</i>	<i>looked as if the next strong wind or wave would blow it away. (PP. 14-15)</i>			

Discussion of 1(c)

The nominal group in the Complement, “an entire village on stilts” describes the nature of the settlements in the oil producing communities. The qualifier, “on stilts” describe settlements 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’.

Extract 2(b)

Towards morning, when a pink light stitched in in through <i>the million</i>	Million	micro	openings	In the roof thatch Henshaw crawled over to my side and shook me awake. (P.150)
M	M	M	M	H

Discussion of 2(b)

The nominal group of ideological significance here is “the million micro openings.” It enhances the sordid ambience and the depth of poverty in the environment. It echoes “the punctured zinc roof” in Extract 1(b). The MH structure underscores the idea of leaking roof.

Extract 2 (c)

Deserted	villages’ (P.96) I didn’t know how long they had been the Major’s prisoners, or what other punishment they had endured in addition to			
M	H			
the	petrol	drenching	the	major’s
M	H	Q	M	M
<i>demented</i>	<i>patriotism</i>			
M	H (P.150)			

Discussion of 2(c)

The nominal group ‘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

What Jeffries’ (2010) seeks to do in Naming and Describing is to see how the texts we read impact on us ideologically. She sees ideology as those

ideas that are shared by a community or society because they have been reproduced, re-asserted and reaffirmed by dominant groups in the media and texts to the extent that they become naturalized as self-evident or common sense.

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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