

ENCODING EXPERIENCE IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*: A CRITICAL STYLISTIC STUDY

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Abstract

There is a prevalence of corruption, violence, exploitation and ecological devastation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. These afore-mentioned vices are portrayed through the use of dialogic, significations, symbolisms and narrations—howbeit—aided by sentential enaction of actions, events and state. Thus, this paper seeks to holistically examine the representations of actions, events and state in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. To do this, Jeffrey's (2010) critical stylistics model which centres on the investigation of underlying ideologies within a text or an utterance is the foundation upon which the study was premised, with emphasis on the Halliday's Transitivity Model—thus forming its theoretical framework. With this framework, Habila's use of the processes of transitivity to highlight the subject of corruption, violence and exploitation as entrenched in the society. The method of analysis used was the textual analysis. Twelve excerpts were extracted from Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* with focus on his choice of lexical items within a syntactic construction. This aided in the explication of how actions, events and states are represented in the text. From the findings, it was concluded that Habila's lexical choices reflect the four processes of the transitivity model; Material process, verbalisation, mental process and relational process. Through these processes, his ideologies which, primarily, is the indictment of the government and oil companies in the exploitation of the people are not just well represented but have within them the potential to be impressed upon the readers.

Keywords: Critical Stylistics, actions, events, state, transitivity model, ideologies, representation

Introduction

In Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is a recurrent motif of water which is a medium through which themes of ecological devastation, environmental degradation, corruption, violence and exploitation are explored (Aluya and Ocheme, 2024). This portrayal is primarily aided by the sentential enaction of action through lexical choices. As such, it has prompted curiosities from several researchers across the disciplines, especially language and literature who seek to investigate these significations and portrayals—howbeit—through diverse means and approaches. Ojarikre (2018) for instance, approaches Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* through critical stylistics but with emphasis on systemic functional grammar (SFG). In his study, he examines the usage of nominal group by Habila to explicate the

exploitation of petroleum resources in the Niger Delta. Ojarikre arrives at the conclusion that Habila has successfully named and described the situation in Niger Delta (2018).

Though Chukwulobe (2012) agrees with Ojarikre, he insists that “it is the exploitation of the human members of the environment that gives impetus to the exploitation and destruction of non-humans”. There is substance in Chukwulobe's claim as the non-sentient objects in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* are incapable of intentionally causing their own destruction. Besides the rationale that makes Chukwulobe's claim plausible, he hinges this claim on Book Chin's Social Ecology Theory as a way of foregrounding it.

The subjects of discourse under Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* are allow for multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary studies

thus researchers from both language and literature have examined the texts. Nonetheless most of those examinations are greatly focused on the environmental implicatures of the texts. One of such examinations is that of Abianji-Menang (2021) who focuses her study on the negative impacts of oil production on the Niger Delta. As a literary critic, she premises her research on the ecocentric discourses Cheryll et al. This approach is similar to that of Ojukwu (2019) who focuses on the country's dependency on oil and its devastating consequences on the environment. Ojukwu does this from a purely literary perspective by highlighting dialogues and analysing their implications to the subject in discourse.

Contrary to this, Chris et al. (2024) though hints on environmental degradation, centres his study on the investigation of how meaning is negotiated in the text using certain stylistic elements such as repetition, synonym, antonym, hyponym and metonym. While there is a great divergence in approach between Chris et al. (2024) and Ojukwu (2019), Abianji-Menang (2021), there is similarity with that of Ojarikre (2018) as both studies are chiefly premised in stylistics. However, even with the similarity, Chris et al. diverges from Ojarikre as his work approaches Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* via an ecostylistic route and with focus on the Cohesion Theory whereas Ojarikre approaches the same text via critical stylistics and with emphasis on Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Though there have been substantial studies on Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, both stylistically and literary, there has been no work on critical stylistic study of representations of actions, events and states using Jeffrey's action tools of analysis while emphasising on Hallidayan's Transitivity Model hence the gap in which this study seeks to fill.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework upon which this study is underpinned is Jeffries' (2010) critical stylistic model with emphasis on the Hallidayan's

transitivity model. Jeffries' critical stylistic model argues that naming is the linguistic process which people, places and things are typically identified in language, including the ways in which such entities can be characterized as well as the ideological consequences of it (Jeffries, 2010). Within the CS model is the position that a writer or speaker has the power to choose the words that suits her/his purpose the most closely and this includes the choice of lexical verbs which will prevent the situation in the way that the author desires and with the intension of influencing the readers (Jeffries, 2010). This choice by the writer aids in the presentation of information as action (what is being done), event (what is happening) and state (what simply is) (Aluya and Ocholor, 2024). Though there are ten tools that could be used to analyse a text as highlighted by Jeffries, this study focuses on the tool of representing actions, events and states. As stated by Jeffries (2010), the Hallidayan's transitivity model is suitable for such analysis as it assigns lexical verbs to a number of different categories according to the kind of process or state they appear to be describing. These categories include; Material action processes, verbalization processes, mental cognition processes and relational processes (Ogunsiji and Aluya, 2022).

The material action, according to Jeffries (2010) is the most "prototypical verb" as it refers to something done or happening physically but also with abstract elements. The material action is split into three categories; Material Action Intentional (MAI) which is an action performed by conscious beings; Material Action Supervention (MAS) which is concerned with unintentional actions performed by conscious beings; Material Action Events (MAE) which is concerned with verbs used alongside inanimate actors where a human agency is downplayed or missing (Aluya, 2018).

The second category is the verbalisation process which is concerned with the description of

any act in which language is made use of. Because this often signals the presence of a human actor, verbalization is mostly associated to material actions (Aluya and Edem, 2018). The third category is the Mental Process (MP) which is concerned with what happens within human beings. This process is split into three types; Mental Cognition (MC) which has to do with thinking, knowing, realizing etc.; Mental Reaction (MR) which has to do with feeling, liking, hating; Mental Perception (MP) which has to do with sensing, hearing, feeling, seeing and tasting. The fourth category is the relational process. This process is concerned with the static or stable relationships between carriers and attributes, rather than dynamic actions or changes. The verbs in use here include *to be* verbs, possessive relation verbs like “have” and circumstantial relation verbs like “be” (Jeffries, 2010). The representation of actions, states and events is possible through sentential enactments and these enactments are imbued with lexical choices primarily focused on verbs referred to as “process” while other constituents of the sentence are referred to as “actors” and “goals”. The CS Model, in combination with Halliday’s transitivity model captures well the representation of actions, states and events in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* hence its choice as the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

Method of data collection/analysis

The data of this study are excerpts from Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. These excerpts were carefully and deliberately selected with referents to their representation of actions, states and events as well as association with Habila’s lexical choice. The excerpts were also selected in alignment with the major themes of the text which are corruption, environmental devastation, ecological degradation and violence. This was to aid in the examination of how these themes were represented in actions, states and events through lexical choices. The method of data analysis used was the content

analysis. This aided in the explicit examination of the author’s lexical choices, the material actions encoded in them and how it could affect the perceptibility of the readers. Through the lenses of critical stylistics with focus on Halliday’s transitivity model, the manner in which the author’s ideologies were represented in actions, states and events as well as its presumable influence on the readers were holistically taken into view.

Analysis and discussion of findings

In this section, data from Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* are examined through the lens of critical stylistics with emphasis on transitivity model. The transitivity model is concerned with the lexical choices of an author, with specificity to verbs and how they are central to the message a writer intends to convey. Also, through critical stylistics, the ideologies of Helon Habila as well as the perceptibility of those ideologies by the reader are taken into view. Prominence is given to verbs and verbal phrases since they are the crux of the transitivity model and as such are highlighted in bold. The objective of this analysis is to examine the representation of actions, states and events by Helon Habila. As such, the processes of the transitivity model (material action, verbalization, mental process and relational process) are the focus of this analysis.

Excerpt 1

So why haven’t the militants **bombed** the pipelines here because of the oil?

Because the oil companies **pay** them to not do so.

The verb “bombed” in the above excerpt is categorized under the Material Action Intention (MAI) process as it is directly associated with a conscious actor which is “the militants”. Through an interrogative dialogue, Helon Habila highlights the Material Action of violence and exploitation of natural resources in the Niger Delta. Also, in the response to the question by the first character, the verb “pay” is used in association with a Noun

Phrase that, though seemingly looks unconscious, is however conscious as it is embedded within its underlying structure the conscious people at the hem of affairs in “the company” thus making the sentence a material action intentional (MAI) process.

Excerpt 2

Our pipelines **are vandalised** daily, **losing** millions...and millions for the country as well. The people **don’t understand** what they do themselves.

In the above excerpt, the verbs/verb phrase “are vandalised” and “losing” are material action events (MAE) process because the actors are not overtly stated in the sentence. Though the sentence is made up of the noun phrase (NP) “our pipelines” at the position of the subject, it is not the subject but the object as such the recipient of the action/verb “vandalised” and “losing” cannot be considered the actor. Helon Habila’s approach to this sentence is reflective of the obscurity of the actors that perpetrate the crime of vandalization. These actors are often times invisible and wanted by the government as is evident in the above excerpt. Nonetheless, the verb phrase “don’t understand” is associated with an overt actor and that makes it a material action intentional process (MAI). This speaks to the ignorance of the people in face of exploitation and violence, both from the government and non-state actors.

Excerpt 3

Chief Malabo **was arrested**, his hands **tied** behind his back as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of **supporting** the Militants and **plotting** against the federal government and **threatening** to kidnap oil workers.

In the above excerpt the verbs “was arrested” and “tied” are both material action event process (MAE) as their actor is not overtly stated. Though there is an NP element as the head of the sentence, the sentence in real sense is a passive sentence

which makes the NP element an object/recipient of the verbs and not the actor. This is because the text hinges greatly on narration and most of the expression are reportages. However, in the reportage by the narrator, chief Malabo is the acting on the verbs “supporting”, “plotting” and “threatening” thus making the sentence material action intentional process (MAI).

Excerpt 4

The Helicopter **followed** us, a disinterested bee, **watching** from a distance. I **expected** the gunman to start shooting, but nothing happened. The helicopter **stayed** with us for a few minutes we **progress** slowly toward the distance mangrove clustered on the horizon, then it left. But before our sigh of relief had properly escaped our lips, two speedboats **appeared** from behind.

In the above excerpt, the verbs “followed”, “watching” and “appeared” are used alongside an inanimate actor “the helicopter” and as such classified under the material action event (MAE) process. The use of these verbs with the inanimate actor aids in the beautification of Helon Habila’s language. But besides that, the insect metaphor “bee” in association with “helicopter” and its “disinterest” is a signification of the conversative nature insects, specifically bees and how they tend not to attack until one pokes their hive. The helicopter belonging to the oil company just followed the journalists like a bee, not attacking them but guarding against the potential unraveling of the corruption and exploitation perpetuated by them (the oil company). Nonetheless, the verb “progress” belongs to an intentional actor “we” which in this case are the journalists and their tour guide thus making it a material action intentional (MAI) process.

Excerpt 5

I **knocked** my knee against wood and for a few minutes, my left leg was totally paralysed. I **held** my knee with one hand

and with the other. I **clung** to the side of the boat as the boy tried to bring the engine alive.

The verb “Knocked” in the above excerpt though associated with a conscious being is beyond the control of that conscious being and according to Jeffries (2010), such action is regarded as material action (MAS) supervision. Whereas, the verbs “held” and “clung” are within the conscious being’s control, and in fact, a reactionary action to earlier highlighted MAS and as such is regarded as using the material action intentional (MAI).

Excerpt 6

Somewhere in this godforsaken waters, that’s where he must have picked it up. There’re plenty of bugs flourishing here. And he was in pretty bad shape to begin with. I suspect his liver is gone already.

The verbal phrase “picked it up” is a supervision if the clause in which it appears is taken into cognizance. This is because the subject “he” unintentionally “picked it up”, the it being a disease as reported by the narrator through a previous dialogue. However, it can also be considered verbalization if the clause is taken in its surface structure. However, the narrator chooses to use a clause with a verbal construction that downplays the language. In the literal/surface activity, the actor might have well picked something concrete up that is not overtly stated but with referents to a previous conversation about “diseases”, the deep/metaphorical activity of picking up something abstract “somewhere in” the “godforsaken waters” is revealed. This representation by Helon Habila portrays the negative actions of the government and how it directly and indirectly affects the citizens. However, by using the verbal phrase “picked it up” in relation to the innocent conscious being, Habila showcases that looming tendency for the citizens to be blamed and held responsible for the evil perpetuated by the government and non-state actors. The weight of this exemplification by

Habila is so heavily encoded as it carries within it the unconscious indictment of a victim by their sympathizer for reasons of mental conditioning by the government and non-state actors. The sympathizer does not realize that by using the verb phrase “picked it up”, he is accusing the victim of being responsible for the ordeals the government and non-state actors have burdened them with.

Excerpt 7

Well, I did my duty as their doctor. I **told** them of the dangers that accompany their quenchless flare, but they wouldn’t listen. Jeffries (2010) gives rules on the identification of verbalisation. He asserts that verbalization is any action that uses language. He further asserts that “verbalisation comprises of a “sayer” which is compulsory and a verbiage which is common, but not always present and a target, which is less common” (Jeffries, 2010). In the above excerpt, the verb “told” is classified as verbalisation since it possesses the sayer “I” and the verbiage “them of the dangers that accompany their quenchless flare”. The usage of this verbalisation by Helon Habila signifies the presence of a forewarner in the society who usually sees the potential evil of a government or non-state actors and warns the people of them. But like in most cases, the people either blinded by religion or ethnicity as is the case of Nigeria, do not always listen.

Excerpt 8

And whenever a single ray **found** its way through the million leaves and branches and **fell** on our skin or on the dead leaves below, it **looked** so pure and startling, as it had been refined through a thousand sieves.

The verb “found”, “fell” and “looked” in the above excerpt is associated with an inanimate actor which is the “single ray” thus categorized on the material action event process (MAE). This portrayal represents the “pure and startling” nature of an environment that is not plagued by the woes of industrialization and the exploitation that

accompanies it. By doing this, Habila reimagines a pure and clean environment void of pollution, degradation, violence and corruption. To embolden it, he juxtaposes this pure environment with the “refining” metaphor. This is captured by the expression “refined though thousand sieves”. With this metaphor, Habila showcases how an environment can be as beautiful and startling as gold even without being mined and plundered for such raw materials.

Excerpt 9

I **realized** how very much like theirs my childhood must have been. Barefoot and underfed we may have been but the sea was just outside our door, constantly **bringing** surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to our lives.

The third category of the process as highlighted by Jeffries (2010) is mental process which is split into three categories; The first is Mental Cognition (MC), such as thinking, knowing, realizing, understanding and so on. The second type is Mental Reaction (MR) such as feeling (emotionally), liking, hating and so on. The third subcategory is Mental Perception (MP) which includes sensing, hearing, feeling (literally), seeing, tasting and so on. From the above excerpt, the verb “realized” signifies the mental process of cognition. Here, the actor “I” gets an epiphany of how similar and wretched his childhood was to the people he is witnessing. This epiphany as portrayed by Habila reflects the daunting realisations that comes when one is finally void of ignorance. In this case the actor is finally aware of the corruption by the oil company and with that knowledge looks at the children with retrospective lens. Nonetheless, the verb “bringing” is acted upon by an inanimate actor and thus categorized under the material action event process (MAE).

Excerpt 10

The major **heard** about it and one night he got too of his men and went to the boy’s favourite night club and abducted him

right in front of everyone. They **took** him to the graveyard and shot him in the groin after breaking his four limbs.

The above excerpt makes use of the mental process and belongs to the sub-category of mental perception with specificity to hearing where the verb “heard” is used to describe the action that accompanies the actor. The use of this by Habila is to engage the readers sense of perception and as such auditorily impress upon them his ideologies. Since verbs like this are often associated to a conscious being, they could pass for material action intentional (MAI). Nonetheless, it is pertinent to not that the action they convey are not always external to the being but internal thus making them a mental process as is the case of the verb “heard” in the above excerpt. However, the verb “took” belong to the material action intentional as it pertains to an action external of its performer (the conscious being or beings).

Excerpt 11

My father **is** still in prison, Boma and I still **go** to visit him and each time he **sees** her face, he turns away and his hands shake, recently she has stopped going. My mother comes from the village once every month to see him. Occasionally I go with her and I **watch** them look at each other and sometimes they have a lot to talk about, and sometimes they just stare at each other in silence. The last time I went with her was over a month ago. I sit away from them, but I **can hear** what they are saying; she tells him about her life in the village, the farm, how the harvest this year has been good. He listens, nodding his head, and all the time he stares at her trying to **catch** her eyes but she avoids his eyes as she speaks.

In tandem with Jeffries (2010) the fourth category of process is the relational category, which represents the static or stable relationships between Carriers and Attributes, rather than any

changes or dynamic actions. These verbs include the copula (to be) and other ‘Intensive’ relations (RI), Possessive relations as indicated by verbs like have (RP) and ‘Circumstantial’ relations (RC) which involve verbs of movement and the verb be as well, with the placing or timing of the process being uppermost. In the above excerpt, the verb to be “is” represents the static action between the carrier NP “My father” and attributes “still in prison”. This portrayal is reflective of the continuum of the punishment by the government and the suffering of the poor masses. Here, Habila attempts to influence upon the readers his ideology of the government’s tendency to abuse power and indulge in excesses. Nonetheless, the verb “sees” is associated with mental perception of sight while “hear” is associated with that of hearing. This usage is to enable the readers not just understand these ideologies but sense them as well. However, the verb “catch” is a case of verbalisation as it is a metaphorical representation of locking eyes with a person.

Excerpt 12

I **felt** hope and doubt alternating in my chest. I **felt** a stirring of some hunger inside me, something I had never **felt** before, a conviction almost, that I was meant to be here, on this boat, on this trail. I was like a breeze blowing through the long-forgotten section of my mind. I knew zag could see this staring hope in my eyes; he could give it a name and describe how irresistible was its pull

The verb “felt” as used in the above excerpt is associated with the sub-category of mental perception where the action of feeling is within the actor. This verb is deliberately used and repeated by Habila to represent the internal belief and conviction that members of the society should

have as possessed by the actor in the above excerpt.

Conclusion

Through critical stylistics and with emphasis on the transivity model, the representation of actions, events and states have been examined. While doing this, the ideologies embedded in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* has been highlighted. Some of those ideologies include Habila’s views of the government and oil companies as being complicit in the ecological degradation and environmental devastation that is prevalent in the Niger Delta. Consequentially, through the processes of the transivity model, material action intentional (MAI), Material action unintentional Material action supervision, verbalisation, relation process and mental cognition processes have been explored as well as the manner in which Habila uses them. Besides the manner in which he uses them, the intent for their usage has also been revealed. For instance, it has been made pertinent through the study that the assigning of verbs to actors—whether conscious or unconscious has an effect on both the ideology embedded in such expression and the potential perceptibility of such ideologies by the readers. Such perceptibility is fostered by the mental cognition process where verbs that act within the conscious being are used. With this, Habila seeks to make his readers feel, see, touch, hear and smell these degradations and by so doing relate to the actions, states and events represented in *Oil on Water*. Further ways in which these ideologies are emboldened and given life is by the assigning of actions to inanimate actors. By so doing the water, which is a recurrent motif in the text, is given life and made to also feel the weight of its destruction—which, by extension implores empathy from the readers.

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