

## EQUATING AND CONTRASTING AS CRITICAL STYLISTIC DEVICES IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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### Abstract

Equating and contrasting are critical stylistic tools for an author to portray various world perspectives. This paper examines equating and contrasting as critical stylistic devices in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Using Lesley Jefferies's (2009) Critical Stylistic Model and a qualitative textual design, the study examines extracts from the novel to demonstrate how equating and contrasting have been used to project the theme of environmental pollution in Niger. The study analyzes and brings to the fore how both devices have been used to simultaneously portray the psychological anxieties of characters and the polluted environment while contrasting the experiences of social groups and their perspectives in the story. Through these devices, Helon Habila offers a variety of narratives that explicate the socio-political and environmental challenges of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Contrasting, degradation, environment, equating, Helon Habila

### Introduction

Habila's novel, *Oil on Water*, has the thematic preoccupation of the devastating effects of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta, the neglect of the people by the authorities concerned as a result of corruption in Nigeria, and the resultant social unrest in the region. He portrays the people's plights and how literature and the media create public awareness of issues threatening man and society, aimed at proffering solutions (Abiani-menang, 2017; Edem & Aluya, 2019). The Niger Delta region has been plagued by myriads of socio-political challenges that were precipitated by the politics of black gold and environmental degradation occasioned by the exploration of petrochemical products. Environmental activists and eco-critics have lent their voices through arts and other media against the degradation of the environment (Amuller, 2014; Aluya & Uduma, 2024). To convey their perspectives and ideological beliefs in literature, writers of literary works deploy various language options. Adebayo (2019) asserts that creative writers struggle to devise language patterns to convey their vision.

Also, Jefferies (2010) asserts that Critical Stylistics is used to assemble a text's main general

function in representing realities (p.14). She adds that it includes numerous tools that are thought to be more than anything else in CDA. The model uses these various techniques to demonstrate the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Evans & Schuller, 2015; Edem & Aluya, 2023). These tools include naming and describing, representing actions/events/states, equating, exemplifying and enumerating, prioritising, implying and assuming, negating, hypothesising, and presenting others' speech and thought. This study targets the equating mentioned here, which encompasses contrasting, which Helon Habila incorporates to construct meaning in the text (Aluya & Ochulor, 2024).

Furthermore, the use of Equating and Contrasting by Helon Habila aids the presentation of thoughts with a coherent language pattern. According to Adagboyin and Aluya (2017), "A text is coherent when its pieces are connected and meaningful to the reader. Cohesion happens when the interpretation of one item is dependent on another". (pg4). With the use of equating and contrasting, Habila patterns are narratives balancing contrasting linguistic features, which highlights ideas and gives the reader a mental picture of the situation in the Niger Delta. The title

of the novel itself is a contrast that explicates, on the one hand, the relationship between the inhabitants of the Niger Delta and the federal government and, on the other, the oil industries and citizens of the region. While the novel *Oil on Water* can be regarded as successful, given the expressed views of the author regarding the ecological challenges faced by the Niger Delta inhabitants, the novel also reveals his use of equating and contrasting as a stylistic device to expose the horrid state of affairs in the Niger Delta region (Albert et al., 2018). Equating and contrasting are two critical stylistic devices used in meaning construction to create subtle differences and coated connotations in language. In Helon Habila's novel, *Oil on Water*, the use of these devices to explicate the thematic preoccupation of the novel and ease the reader's understanding of the socio-political and environmental challenges highlighted in the novel (Ogunsiji & Aluya, 2022). This study seeks to explore the author's application of equating and contrasting as devices to expose the severity of the conditions in the region as well as examines and explicates how Helon Habila deploys "Equating and Contrasting" as critical stylistics devices to construct meaning in *Oil on Water*.

### Statement of the Problem

The success of the struggle of the people of the Niger Delta against decades of exploitation and the degradation of its environment through oil spillage and military attacks that have pushed many to become refugees in their land is largely dependent on the ability to expose the atrocities committed by the federal government and the oil industries to the larger world (Amuller, 2014; Abiani-meaning, 2017). Consequently, while applying the right language and communication tools is critical in coaching or capturing events in this endeavour, the meaning constructed can make or mar the entire effort of the agitations. Aluya & Ocheme (2024) explore the relationship between language and its environment, with particular emphasis on the role of language in ecological deterioration and the social evil accompanying it. This paper seeks to explicate the use of equating and contrasting as a viable critical stylistic device used by Helon Habila in the construction of meaning in his novel *Oil on Water*,

which dwells on the struggle of the Niger Delta people to reclaim their homeland and their right to a life of dignity.

### Literature Review

Stylistics is the study of the language of literature, which employs various tools for linguistic analysis. It focuses on analysing language in literary texts to explicate how meaning is constructed. According to Leech & Short (2007), Stylistics bridges the gap between linguistic form and literary meaning, creating varying shapes of understanding of a text. In this context, equating and contrasting are basic tools for highlighting similarities and differences, which helps the readers to draw their opinions and appreciation. Ogunsiji & Aluya (2022) observe that the practice has become the concern of critical stylistics where social and other life traditions are to be reflected in texts and how to uncover the textual content through linguistic techniques exploited by a text producer. Adagbonyin & Aluya (2017) posit that a text projects a set of ideas, beliefs, and opinions, which are considered to be merely forming a group of ideational patterns from which the text is organised. The text is organised if such content issues are presented in a patterned format. In *Oil on Water*, Habila presents his thoughts in a structured format using equating and contrasting as devices to draw responses from the reader by influencing his thoughts and actions. Previous studies on Helon Habila's *Oil and Water* have been focused on the devastation of the landscape, the themes of environmental degradation, political corruption, exploitation, and human cost of oil exploration with little regard to the stylistic techniques used by Helon Habila employed to construct these themes in his novel (Edem & Aluya, 2023). However, this study seeks to cover that gap by examining how equating and contrasting are deployed to shape the development of the account while enhancing the reader's understanding of the sequences and events in the story.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on Critical Stylistics as a theory that embraces linguistic analysis with critical theory to explain how writers in their texts construct meaning within a given socio-cultural context. Jeffries (2010) argues that stylistic

analysis should not only describe the linguistic features of a text but also examine how the features contribute to the text's ideological positioning. With regards to Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, equating and contrasting will be used to analyze the means through which the author navigates issues of identity, environmental degradation, power, corruption, exploitation, oppression, injustice and resistance (Aluya & Ochulor, 2024).

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this study is qualitative and interpretive, which analyzes data collected from both primary and secondary sources. The methodology enables an efficient analysis of the text, especially with regard to human experiences within a social context. It is also imperative and effective in analyzing data from previous eco-critical researchers.

### **Equating and Contrasting as Critical Stylistics Devices**

As earlier mentioned, equating and contrasting are used in literature to analyze and understand complex ideas and concepts embedded in a text. Bloom (1998) corroborates this assertion when he states that equating is a powerful tool for the revealing of hidden connections and meanings in text. Aluya & Ochulor (2024) also agreed that equating allows readers to identify patterns and relationships between seemingly disparate elements. While contrasting highlights the tensions and contradiction within and between texts, revealing nuanced insights, (Barthes, 1977). According to Kristeva, (1980) by contrasting, authors can subvert expectations, and create complex, thought provoking narratives. Equating and contrasting are therefore very important tools for critical stylistics analysis to convey the author's vision in a work of art.

### **Equating as a Critical Stylistic Device in Habila's *Oil on Water***

The stylistic device, equating, deals with similarities between different elements. In Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, the contaminated waters of the Niger Delta are often equated with the moral decay of those who exploit the region's resources. This represents the equating of the physical environment with the characters' emotional states and draws a parallel between the devastated, polluted, decaying ecosystem and the

psychological unrest experienced by the protagonists. This equating emphasizes the interconnectivity between the external environment and the cognitive and emotional condition of the region's inhabitants, insinuating that the degradation of one lead to the debilitation of the other. Furthermore, Habila emphasizes the common experience of suffering at all strata of society and circles within the region, highlighting the universal impact of the oil exploration conflict. Equating as used here fosters a sense of solidarity among the oppressed, villagers, militants and journalists, with a foregrounding effect on the reach or widespread nature of the crises. Perhaps even the soldiers are not left out as their lives and wellbeing are not guaranteed as they are also in danger from the impact of war and environmental pollution.

### **Contrasting as a Critical Stylistic Device In Habila's *Oil on Water***

Contrasting focuses on the difference between the elements, often to emphasise conflict or tension. Habila utilises contrast to highlight the significant gap between the living conditions of the oil company employees or executives and the surrounding host communities. The opulent lifestyles of the oil workers are contrasted with the abject poverty and squalor of the villagers, accentuating the circumstantial social and economic disparities inflicted and perpetuated by the oil industries. Similarly, Habila contrasts the celebrated and much-touted image of Nigeria as a wealthy modern nation with the stark reality of its environment and human exploitation. In this situation, its citizens are compelled to live in dehumanizing conditions. This contrast is an interrogation of the propaganda by the government and oil companies to keep the rest of the world blindfolded about the deplorable human conditions in the Niger Delta. It exposes the inherent injustices and decay that the propaganda seeks to cover.

Also, different characters' perspectives are contrasted within the novel. As a strategy, Habila contrasts the perspective of the Major, whose professional perspective and decorum change after the attack on his daughter, as captured in this excerpt.

"They say he became like this after his daughter

was raped". (Chpt 4. E Version). Additionally, it contrasts the change in perspective of Salomon, the driver who originally kidnapped Isabel, Floode's wife, but later changed his perspective and orchestrated her escape, pitching his tent on the side of the law as explained in the text (Chpt 18. E Version). Furthermore, Habila contrasts the perspective of the journalists who, on arrival, approached their tasks with detachment and professionalism. However, their experience in the Niger Delta gradually erodes this pattern, forcing them to confront the harsh realities experienced by the villagers. This contrast between professionalism and personal involvement aptly captures and interrogates the ethical responsibilities of those who document the harsh experiences of citizens of the Niger Delta. Equating and contrasting in Habilas *Oil and Water* shows how effective the tools are in meaning construction. First, it gives an insight into the multi-layered understanding of the things in the novel. The equating of human experience with the environment shows the inextricable links between ecological and social schemes, pointing to the inevitability that the destruction of one lead to the destruction of the other. Similarly, contrasting the injustices and progressive propaganda employed

by the government and the oil companies serves to interrogate the purported development often used as a veil to cover the underlying exploitation in the region. Through the use of equating and contrasting, Habila not only highlights the physical and emotional terrain of the Niger Delta but explores the ethical and political issues that characterise the exploitation of natural resources. This catalysis, unveils, and enhances the reader's understanding of the connection between the personal and political, the local and the global, and helps him fully grasp the experiences, challenges and complicated nature of issues in the terrain.

### Conclusion

The use of equating and contrasting in the construction of meaning in Helon Habilas's *Oil on Water* attests to the potency of the devices as critical tools of stylistics. Their impact in drawing parallels between environment and human experiences and calling attention to the contrast between social groups and their perspectives simultaneously questions the exploitation and corruption bedevilling the Niger Delta. It engages the reader and causes him to contemplate the challenges and issues in the region. The uses of the devices thus serve as an effective tool for constructing meaning in the novel.

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