

## PRIORITISING AS A CRITICAL STYLISTIC TOOL IN HELON HABILO'S *OIL ON WATER*

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### Abstract

This research looks at the use of prioritisation as a critical stylistic tool in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The research aims to analyse how specific elements within the text are prioritised by Habila to strengthen the ideological dimensions of his narrative, heighten emotional impact, and strengthen topical ideas. The research is qualitative in nature, using Lesley Jefferies (2010) Critical Stylistics Models but focussing only on prioritisation. Ten (10) extracts were selected from the text to demonstrate how this critical stylistic tool has been put into use in the text. The findings show that Habila's stylistic choices strongly influence the narrative structure and thematic concerns, offering a nuanced understanding of character development and plot dynamics. The study further reveals that prioritisation in *Oil on Water* sets out to foreground key events and character experiences, create urgency, and examine the differences between expected and actual outcomes. The data analysis shows that Habila employs prioritisation to emphasise notable narrative moments. This technique by Habila also focusses on the emotional and physical states of characters. The study contributes to the broader field of literary criticism by demonstrating how prioritisation functions as a key stylistic tool in contemporary African fiction.

**Keywords:** Critical stylistics, prioritisation, *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila

### Introduction

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has garnered significant scholarly attention for its exploration of environmental degradation, political corruption, and the human cost of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. Researchers have extensively analysed the novel's themes of displacement, ecological devastation, and the socio-political turmoil that shapes the lives of its characters. Contributions to the literature have focused on the novel's portrayal of conflict, the environment, and its critique of postcolonial governance. Scholars such as Awe (2018) and Okoye (2020, p. 57) have explored Habila's narrative techniques and ideological underpinnings.

Others have done linguistic study like Edokpayi (2019, p.287) and Miller (2017, p. 413), while Adénonmi and Koutchadé (2021, p. 370) did a pragmatic perspective study of the text. Scholars have undertaken myriads of research on the text. However, research focusing on prioritisation as a critical stylistic tool for shaping the novel's ideology appears to be very scanty. While existing

research focusses on the importance of Habila's stylistic choices, the role that prioritisation plays in emphasising key narrative situations, reader interpretation, and forging thematic issues has been largely overlooked. This is what this paper seeks to fill by portraying how Habila employs prioritisation to frame ideologies and influence narratives in *Oil on Water*.

### Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant scholarly attention *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila has received, particularly for its treatment of environmental degradation, human rights abuses, and political corruption in the Niger Delta, there remains a gap in understanding how prioritisation as a specific stylistic device contributes to the construction of these themes. Previous research has explored the novel's thematic content, with scholars like Egya (2016) examining the representation of ecological issues and Amoko (2018) analysing its postcolonial narrative techniques.

Moreover, researchers such as Nwagbara (2017) and Ouma (2015) have investigated the

portrayal of violence and its effects on the Niger Delta populace. However, much of this scholarship has focused on thematic and sociopolitical aspects, with limited attention to the intricacies of Habila's narrative techniques.

While scholars like Eze (2019) and Okuyade (2014) have analysed the broader use of literary devices in African eco-fiction, few studies have specifically examined the role of prioritisation in guiding narrative focus and shaping the reader's ideological engagement. This gap in knowing how prioritisation in *Oil on Water* explicates critical moments, shapes character perception, and touches themes such as environmental devastation and political neglect.

This study tackles the desire for a deeper look at how Habila uses prioritisation to highlight crucial events, character experiences, and themes in *Oil on Water*. While previous research has touched on the novel's broader use of stylistic elements, there has been little in-depth investigation of how prioritisation relates, particularly to the establishment of narrative focus and ideological framing. This omission jeopardises a thorough understanding of Habila's stylistic method and its impact on the novel's thematic and ideological aspects.

By filling this gap, the study hopes to give a detailed analysis of prioritisation in Habila's work, examining how this strategy influences the reader's involvement with the story and increases the text's ideological and emotional relevance. This research will help to enhance understanding of Habila's text and the significance of critical stylistics in contemporary African fiction.

### Literature Review

Many researchers and scholars have written many meaningful contributions on *Oil on Water* (2010) by Helon Habila since it was published, from themes to narrative techniques to style. Scholars have explored how the literary text explicates environmental challenges, socio-economic issues, and political corruption in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This review tracks the publications from the evolution of the text, particularly focusing on prioritisation.

Early studies on *Oil on Water* initially were concerned with thematic discussion. Egeya (2016, pp. 1-12) provided one of the foundational

explorations of how Habila reflects ecological degradation and the human costs of oil exploitation. Egeya emphasised the novel's depiction of environmental damage, showing how Habila creates an urgent narrative surrounding the struggle of marginalised communities against large oil corporations.

Similarly, Amoko (2018, pp. 55–70) examined the postcolonial dynamics in the novel, analysing the portrayal of Western interests and global oil corporations' exploitation of Nigerian resources. Amoko also discussed how the narrative structure reflects the fractured and disjointed realities experienced by the novel's characters. These early studies were valuable in laying the foundation for understanding the socio-political landscape of the Niger Delta as depicted in Habila's work, but they primarily focused on content rather than narrative style.

Subsequently, scholars started to look at social issues in the text. Nwagbara (2017, pp. 307–321) examined how the text projected systemic violence and corruption in Nigeria and how these forces influenced the lives of the Niger Delta communities and their inhabitants. According to Nwagbara, violence was not only a reflection of external oppression but was also an outcome of internal political struggles.

Ouma (2015, pp. 160–172), like Nwagbara (2017, pp. 307–321), focused on the socio-political criticism in *Oil on Water*; however, her focus was on how Habila creates sophisticated characters who traverse the difficult environment. Ouma argued that *Oil on Water* portrays the complex nature of victimhood and conspiracy in a corrupt society, showing how individuals are either contributing towards the systems or resisting the systems of exploitation.

More recent studies began to shift toward examining the novel's stylistic choices. Okuyade (2014, pp. 113–130) focused on Habila's narrative technique, noting how his fragmented storytelling reflects the chaotic socio-political environment. Okuyade argued that Habila's disjointed narrative structure mirrors the unpredictability of life in the Niger Delta, where the lines between survival and death, loyalty and betrayal, were blur.

Eze (2019, pp. 54-63) expanded on this by exploring the narrative and linguistic devices

Habila uses to represent power dynamics. Eze examined the role of language in constructing power and agency in the novel, discussing how characters' speech, dialogue, and narrative focus reflect broader socio-political tensions. Eze's work was important in shifting the focus from broader thematic readings to specific stylistic tools used by Habila to craft his narrative.

In the most recent contributions, scholars have applied critical stylistic approaches to *Oil on Water*. Awe (2018, pp. 89-104) for example examined the politics of language and power in the novel, showing how Habila uses specific languages to frame ideology. Awe emphasised how language is not only the means of telling stories but the tool for power and resistance. By examining the connection between language and power, Awe ushered several conversations on the intricate stylistic devices used by Habila to drive his themes.

Okoye (2020, pp. 55-72) improved on this by looking at how critical stylistic tools like naming and describing, negating, equating and contrast, over-lexicalisation, and prioritisation shape the narrative. Okoye argued that Habila's use of prioritisation—focusing on specific moments, characters, or events—guides the reader's perception and reinforces the novel's ideological concerns about exploitation and power dynamics.

Despite these contributions, a notable gap persists in scholarship regarding the detailed analysis of prioritisation as a critical stylistic tool in *Oil on Water*. While earlier studies explored thematic and socio-political aspects, more recent works have examined broader stylistic approaches without thoroughly investigating how prioritisation shapes the reader's experience and the novel's ideological framing.

Scholars like Miller (2017, pp. 412-428) and Awe (2018, pp. 89-104) have provided critical stylistic analyses, but the role of prioritisation specifically remains under-explored. This gap is significant because prioritisation plays a vital role in how key events and themes are emphasised, guiding the reader's interpretation and focussing attention on critical aspects of the narrative.

The present study aims to fill this gap by focusing specifically on prioritisation as a critical

stylistic tool in *Oil on Water*, exploring how Habila uses this technique to construct meaning, guide reader engagement, and emphasize thematic and ideological concerns. By doing so, the research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Habila's stylistic choices and how they shape the novel's narrative focus and socio-political critique.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Lesley Jeffries (2010) established Critical Stylistics, which provides a paradigm for evaluating how ideological connotations are inscribed in language choices in literary texts. It expands on the findings of systemic functional linguistics and critical discourse analysis by investigating how specific linguistic and textual elements impact readers' perceptions and lead them to specific ideological conclusions. Among the several instruments of critical stylistics, such as naming, modality, negation, and lexical choices, prioritisation stands out as a particularly effective technique for directing readers' attention to crucial issues within a story (Aluya, 2024).

Critical stylistics, as propounded by Lesley Jeffries (2010), provides a framework for comprehending how ideologies are embedded in words within a literary text. It makes use of insights from systemic functional linguistics and critical discourse analysis by looking at how certain linguistic elements and textual characteristics shape readers' perceptions and ideological acumen. From the several tools of critical stylistics—such as naming, modality, negation, and lexical choices—prioritisation stands out as a strong device for directing readers' focus on key issues within a narrative (Aluya & Ocheme, 2024).

Prioritisation refers to the deliberate foregrounding of certain themes, issues, or narratives over others within a text. It is achieved through various narrative techniques, including repetition, lexical choices, narrative structure, and descriptive emphasis (Aluya & Ocholor, 2024). In Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), prioritisation is used to place the Niger Delta's environmental degradation at the centre of the narrative. This focus, in turn, relegates individual human stories to a secondary position, emphasising the overwhelming consequences of oil extraction over

personal or political struggles. Through the critical stylistic tool of prioritisation, Habila not only constructs the environmental crisis as the novel's dominant theme but also embeds a critique of global capitalism and neo-colonialism.

### **Methodology**

This research uses a qualitative, interpretive design that is based on close textual analysis, focussing mainly on the stylistic tool of prioritisation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Using critical stylistics as the broader theoretical framework, this study will look at how Habila's stylistic choices determine narrative structure and thematic concerns and how they contribute to the overall ideological position of the novel (Aluya & Uduma, 2024). The analysis will concentrate on identifying patterns of prioritisation through the novel's language, its structure, and its descriptive choices.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

In this section, ten (10) selected extracts from *Oil on Water* will be analysed with the critical stylistic tool of prioritisation. These extracts have been carefully selected to show how Habila foregrounds key narrative themes. These extracts exploit information using a frontal process by which clausal elements have been placed at the beginning of the sentence and subordination, making the extracts less susceptible to question. Now, let us examine how the following extracts illustrate these.

[1] 'Although we couldn't see any guards in our immediate vicinity, I knew they were there, shadowy, watching, waiting.' (p. 142)

Extract [1] contains one subordinate clause and one main clause. The writer employs prioritisation by exploiting the information structure in this text. A close study of the extract shows the displacement of the main clause. In other words, the subordinate clause has taken the main clause's place. This is in a view to draw readers' attention to focus on the sense of surveillance and the looming, invisible presence of guards, even though they are not physically visible to the characters or the reader. The prioritisation of this unseen threat over the immediate environment or other concerns is achieved through several words such as "shadowy," "watching," and "waiting," which

emphasise the hidden and ominous presence of the guards. These words, which evoke a sense of constant, though invisible, monitoring, are given prominence in the sentence, directing the reader's focus to the invisible but pervasive danger (Ogunsiji & Aluya, 2022). The guards are presented not through direct action but through their implied presence, which is prioritised over any tangible visual details in the scene. Despite not seeing the guards ("we couldn't see any guards"), the narrative prioritises the sense that they are still there, watching. This shifts the focus from what is physically present in the immediate vicinity to what is implicitly present. By emphasising on the unseen, Habila makes the invisible guards the dominant concern, overshadowing the characters' immediate surroundings or emotions. The use of "I knew they were there" suggests an internal certainty and prioritises the psychological experience of surveillance over the literal, physical absence of the guards. The phrase "I knew they were there" signals a high degree of certainty, which reinforces the prioritisation of the guards' presence despite their physical invisibility. This modality shapes the reader's perception of the situation emphasising the inevitability of the surveillance, making it the focal point of the passage.

[2] 'Although he was not confined in any way, he soon realized that he was as much a hostage in the forest as Isabel, and he grew scared.' (p. 155)

In extract [2], the writer focuses on the character's mind, it highlights the mental switch from freedom to being a hostage. The subordinate clause "Although he was not confined in any way" presents the notion of physical freedom, but it is quickly subordinated to the realisation that the character is "as much a hostage" as Isabel. This deliberate contrast switches the attention from the external, physical condition to the internal realisation of hostage. This emphasises how psychological confinement is more significant than the character's physical state. The key moment in the passage is the realisation that "he was as much a hostage in the forest as Isabel." This realisation is prioritised, as it marks a turning point in the character's understanding of his situation. The sentence structure leads the reader from

physical freedom to the mental shift toward fear. The growing fear (“and he grew scared”) is then foregrounded, becoming the primary emotional experience, making it clear that the character’s psychological response to his circumstances overshadows the absence of physical restraint (Aluya, 2016). The writer’s use of “soon realized” shows a strong conviction in the character’s growing awareness of his captivity. This conviction of this realisation is prioritised over the earlier, misleading sense of freedom. This buttresses the imaginary weight of being a hostage, prioritising the internal conflict over any potential external freedom.

[3] ‘Although the Doctor had prepared me for this, and although I had been with Zaq most of last week and seen him ailing and declining daily, I still felt totally disoriented by the news of his death.’ (160)

Extract [3] is a complex sentence, consisting of two subordinate clauses and one main clause. By using prioritisation, Habila succeeds in highlighting the emotional impact of Zaq’s death on Rufus, the narrator. Showing Rufus’ inner confusion and perplexity over the doctor’s initial warnings of his death. The opening clauses (“Although the Doctor had prepared me for this” and “although I had been with Zaq most of last week and seen him ailing and declining daily”) emphasize the logical, rational preparation for Zaq’s death. However, these statements are immediately subordinated to the emotional reaction that follows. “I still felt totally disoriented by the news of his death.” the focus is on how devastated the news of Zaq’s death impacts Rufus. This shows that Habila prioritizes the effect of the news on his emotion over the doctor’s warning, showing that despite the knowledge of his impending death, Rufus does not have the emotional shock absorbers to bear it. The phrase “I still felt totally disoriented” is given narrative prominence, placing the reader’s attention on the character’s emotional and psychological state (Aluya & Ocholor, 2024). The repetition of the word “although” in the opening clauses builds up the expectation that the narrator would be prepared for Zaq’s death, but the emotional disorientation disrupts this expectation. This perplexity and

confusion has been prioritised over the doctor’s earlier prognosis showing that the heart matter often outweighs head knowledge. By stating that Rufus was disoriented, Habila accentuate the intensity of the emotional response. This disorientation is depicted as the dominant experience in the passage, even though the narrator had anticipated Zaq’s death. The shock of the news takes precedence over the long decline and medical prognosis, focusing the reader on the overpowering emotional toll of loss.

[4] ‘because the country was so corrupt, only a few had access to that wealth.’ (80)

[5] ‘because the government doesn’t care, they also don’t care.’ (80)

[6] ‘because they had children and women they’d be forced to stop often.’ (132)

Extracts [4], [5] and [6] are very similar in their structure. They start with the subordinate conjunction because. The writer exploits the information structure in these extracts, these extracts show that the main clauses have been displaced when thoroughly examined. By doing this, the writer gives prominence to the message encoded through the subordinate clause. In extract [4], Habila uses prioritisation to emphasise the systemic corruption in Nigeria, foregrounding its role in creating extreme inequality. The narrative prioritises the problem of corruption over the resulting unequal distribution of wealth. This structural decision subordinates the unequal distribution of wealth to the larger problem of systemic corruption. While the unequal access to wealth is significant, Habila’s prioritisation ensures that the reader perceives it as an effect rather than the primary issue. The wealth inequality is therefore secondary, and the corruption is placed at the centre of the narrative’s critique.

In the fifth [5] extract, Habila uses prioritisation to emphasise the cause-and-effect relationship between government neglect and the people’s corresponding lack of concern. The narrative structure foregrounds the government’s apathy as the root of societal indifference. This construction subordinates the people’s lack of concern to the government’s apathy, making the

reader understand that the government's failure to care precedes and shapes the behaviour of the citizens. The people's indifference is secondary, presented as a response rather than a primary issue.

In this extract [6], Habila employs the use of prioritisation to emphasise the impact of having children and women as the reason for the frequent stops, thereby highlighting the influence of the weaker individuals on the militants' decisions to travel or not to travel. The phrase "because they had children and women" has been placed at the beginning of the sentence, placing prominence on children and women as the primary factor influencing the circumstances of their movement. By prioritising women and children, Habila makes the reader understand value of children and women as the main reason for the frequent stops and not the other factors.

[7] 'After all, he had once been one of them.' (69)

In extract [7] "After all, he had once been one of them," the author uses prioritisation to show Zaq's relationship with the Lagos reporters in the room with Zaq who was shaking profusely and how this affinity influences the reader's understanding of his current situation. The phrase "he had once been one of them" is placed at the end of the sentence, creating a sense of emphasis and revelation. This arrangement of the sentence prioritises the Zaq's previous association with the Lagos reporters, highlighting its significance to the current context. The structure of the sentence however, implies that the Zaq's current status is secondary to his past connection with them. Habila uses prioritisation to emphasize the protagonist's previous affiliation with a group, highlighting its importance in understanding his current situation. This focus on past identity influences the reader's interpretation of the protagonist's present behaviour and underscores the significance of historical connections in shaping current realities.

[8] 'This morning two Reuters reporters, after reading my story, had come to the newsroom to chat with me.' (67)

Extract [8] shows how Habila made use of prioritisation to foreground the significance of the Rufus' report and how it gained recognition by other media people. The clause "after reading my

story" is subordinated within the sentence, while the action of the Reuters reporters arriving at the newsroom is emphasised. This prioritisation places emphasis on the recognition of the protagonist's efforts by an international media organization, subtly highlighting the global relevance of the local crisis. The focus on the reporters' visit prioritises their acknowledgment of the narrator's reporting, suggesting that the narrator's voice has gained a level of significance beyond the local environment. This reflects the thematic concern of Oil on Water—the intersection of local struggles with global attention, thus emphasising the protagonist's role in bringing awareness to the underrepresented issues of the Niger Delta. The prioritisation draws the reader's attention away from the act of writing and onto the broader consequences of the protagonist's work, underscoring the role of journalism in shedding light on the socio-political crises depicted in the novel.

[9] 'that greedy, focused exertion, he kicked off the blanket and released a long, blissful sigh.'  
(76)

Habila in extract [9] uses prioritisation to highlight the narrator's sigh of relief as the central moment in the extract. The description "that greedy, focused exertion" is positioned at the beginning of the sentence, providing context for the sigh. While the exertion is important for understanding the background of the sigh, it is subordinated to the emotional impact of the sigh itself. The adjectives "greedy" and "focussed" describe the exertion in a way that emphasises its intensity and concentration. However, these descriptors are used to set up the emotional payoff, which is the "blissful sigh." By prioritising the sigh, Habila makes it clear that the emotional and physical release is the ultimate outcome of the exertion, giving it greater narrative weight.

[10] 'After a year in a UK prison he was deported back to Nigeria, where he was set free after serving only a month in jail. And after his jail term, he disappeared from Lagos' (84)

Extract [10] is compound-complex sentence. Here Helon Habila makes use of prioritisation to highlight the sequence of significant events and

their impact. The clause, “he disappeared from Lagos,” is intentionally placed at the end of the extract, prioritising it as the most important outcome and the significant narrative event. And by making deportation and brief jail term background details, Habila makes sure that the reader’s attention is on the disappearance- the impactful aspect of the narrative. The mention of serving only a month in jail after a year in a UK prison contrasts with the expected duration of incarceration, highlighting the brevity of the imprisonment in Nigeria. This contrast sets up the context for the disappearance, making it seem even more abrupt and significant by comparison.

### Conclusion

Helon Habila’s use of prioritisation in *Oil on Water* serves as a critical stylistic tool that shapes narrative focus, emotional impact, and reader

interpretation. By strategically emphasising certain events, emotions, and actions, Habila directs the reader’s attention to key elements that define the narrative’s progression and thematic depth. The findings indicate that prioritisation is employed to foreground pivotal moments and emotional states, creating a powerful and focused storytelling technique. The method helps convey urgency, highlight significant character experiences, and underscore the dramatic elements of the narrative. The analysis of prioritisation in Habila’s work reveals its importance in constructing ideological and emotional landscapes within the novel. The approach enhances the reader’s engagement with the narrative by making certain elements stand out as crucial to understanding the characters’ experiences and the unfolding drama.

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