

AN ECOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO FRAMING AND IDEOLOGY IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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Abstract

This study adopts an ecolinguistic framework to analyse the ideological framing of ecological and social crises in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Going beyond thematic critique, it examines the linguistic mechanisms that influence readers' perception of the Niger Delta's petro-violence. Central to this analysis is Arran Stibbe's model, especially the concepts of 'salience' and 'erasure', which are utilised to explore how Habila's prose constructs a particular worldview. The novel's language vividly highlights the visceral, sensory horrors of pollution, such as poisoned waterways and lifeless wildlife, thereby fostering deep empathy for affected communities and ecosystems. However, through grammatical strategies like passivisation, nominalisation, and the omission of specific agents, the narrative also obscures the direct responsibility of multinational oil corporations and complicit government entities. This interplay fosters an ideology of resigned tragedy and systemic inevitability, where environmental devastation is presented as an inescapable natural force rather than a result of deliberate human actions. The study concludes that while Habila's skillful use of language immerses the reader in the slow violence's experience, its neglect of perpetrators risks naturalising the very power structures it criticises. Ultimately, this linguistic analysis affirms Stibbe's framework for unpacking postcolonial eco-narratives and highlights the critical role of discourse in either challenging or perpetuating stories of ecological injustice.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Framing, Ideology, Environmental degradation

Introduction

The Niger Delta, a vast wetland region in southern Nigeria spanning over 70,000 square kilometres, is one of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems, home to mangrove forests, diverse wildlife, and communities dependent on fishing and farming for their livelihoods. However, since the discovery of oil in 1956 at Oloibiri, this area has become a site of severe ecological damage and social upheaval. Reports from organisations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations Environment Programme indicate that over 13 million barrels of oil have spilt into the Delta since operations began, equivalent to one Exxon Valdez disaster annually for decades. This has led to acidified soils, toxic rivers unfit for human or animal use, and health crises, including respiratory diseases, cancers, and birth defects among local populations (Aluya & Ocheme, 2024). The paradox is apparent: a region that produces nearly all of Nigeria's export earnings remains mired in

poverty, with life expectancy around 50 years and unemployment rates exceeding 40% in some areas. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* stands out as a compelling literary response to this crisis surpassing journalistic accounts by crafting a narrative that explores themes of memory, loss, and the intertwined fates of humans and nature.

Published in 2010, the novel follows two journalists, Rufus, a young idealist from the Delta, and Zaq, a cynical veteran, as they investigate the polluted waterways searching for a kidnapped British woman, uncovering layers of violence and despair along their journey. What distinguishes the book is not only its thematic depth but also its stylistic innovation: Habila develops a prose style that mimics the murky, oil-coated waters of the Delta, blending vivid sensory details with subtle omissions to evoke a sense of inevitable doom. Scholarship has situated the novel within postcolonial ecocriticism, highlighting its portrayal of "slow violence" as coined by Rob

Nixon (2011), yet there remains a notable gap in examining the linguistic foundations that construct these representations. This study addresses that gap by employing an ecolinguistic approach, specifically analysing how patterns of salience and erasure in the text shape the petro-capitalist conflict.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: In what ways do linguistic strategies of salience and erasure in *Oil on Water* construct an ideological portrayal of the Niger Delta's environmental and social conflicts, and what broader ecological narratives do these strategies reveal? To answer this, the paper employs a close reading of key excerpts, informed by Stibbe's framework, to show how language not only reflects but actively shapes perceptions of ecological injustice. This approach promotes a more precise, language-focused ecocriticism, highlighting how ideology infiltrates literary discourse through syntax, semantics, and narrative choices. By doing so, the study enhances understanding of how fiction like Habila's can engage readers in environmental awareness, especially in contexts where direct activism faces repression.

Empirical Review

Scholarship on *Oil on Water* has developed significantly since its publication, incorporating postcolonial, ecocritical, and increasingly linguistic perspectives that reflect the novel's diverse engagement with Nigeria's oil economy. Early critiques, such as those by Okuyade (2013) and Addei (2014), situated the work within the tradition of African environmental literature, viewing it as a form of "petro-fiction" that reveals the destruction caused by colonial legacies and neocolonial exploitation. Okuyade (2013) describes the novel as a vivid account of the Delta's "ecological apocalypse," where oil acts as a metaphor for invasive capitalism disrupting indigenous harmony (p. 124). Addei (2014) further analyses this by examining the conflict between traditional subsistence economies and the mechanised intrusion of oil rigs, arguing that Habila demonstrates how such disruptions undermine cultural identities and communal bonds.

Subsequent studies shifted towards psychosocial explorations, integrating Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," the gradual, often unseen harms of environmental degradation. Eze (2016) applies this perspective to examine the novel's portrayal of attritional damage, where pollution seeps into bodies and minds, fostering alienation and trauma among characters like Rufus and the villagers (Aluya & Iangba, 2025). Nwagbara (2017) complements this by scrutinising the depiction of militant resistance and media sensationalism, critiquing how cycles of violence are commodified, turning human suffering into spectacle while disregarding core issues like corporate negligence. Akpome (2018) introduces metaphorical analysis, focusing on recurring symbols such as oil slicks and flames, which he interprets as emblems of unchecked power, though his work remains thematic rather than stylistically detailed. Ushie (2019) edges towards stylistics, observing Habila's atmospheric descriptions that evoke a haunted landscape, yet without a formal linguistic framework.

Recent contributions, especially from 2020 onwards, have incorporated ecolinguistic and ecostylistic elements. For example, Aba et al. (2024) present an ecostylistic approach to environmental degradation in the novel, emphasising how Habila's stylistic choices, such as repetitive imagery of decay, amplify the urgency of ecological advocacy. Similarly, Yakubu et al. (2025) investigates evaluation as an ecolinguistic device, highlighting how Habila employs appraisive language to critique petro-violence, concluding that such techniques position the novel as an informational tool for raising awareness. Hand (2021) advocates for nature's agency in the text, depicting the Delta not as a passive victim but as a retaliatory force, a perspective that aligns with Stibbe's emphasis on ecological stories. Other works, like those by Chukwulobe (2023) and Okpo (2023), explore eco-existential dialectics and postcolonial ecocriticism, emphasising the novel's role in witnessing neocolonial destruction.

While these studies provide a strong foundation, they often prioritise thematic or historical analysis over detailed linguistic examination. This paper

expands on their insights, particularly the ecostylistic developments in recent works, by focusing on Stibbe's (2015) model to explore the micro-level mechanisms of language. It aligns with previous research in supporting ecological and social justice. However, it innovates by viewing linguistic patterns as the primary site of ideological production, contributing a textually grounded perspective on a text that continues to inspire scholarly debate amid ongoing Delta crises.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is based on ecolinguistics, a field that examines how language shapes human relationships with the environment, highlighting the "stories we live by" that either support or threaten ecological harmony. Central to this is Arran Stibbe's *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (2015, 2nd ed.), which assesses discourse for its promotion of positive or harmful narratives about nature. Stibbe argues that language is not a neutral tool but one that influences perceptions, values, and actions towards the biosphere (Aluya & Uduma, 2024). Language is shaped by its physical, psychological, and sociological context. The physical environment refers to the space where users of a particular language are found. The psychological environment operates at the mental level (Aluya & Obande, 2024). For this study, the main tools are salience and erasure, which serve as mechanisms of ideological framing.

Salience involves linguistic techniques that bring certain elements to prominence, capturing reader attention through devices like repetition, vivid adjectives, active voice, or positioning in sentences. For example, attributing agency to environmental features, such as rivers "choking" on oil, makes them active participants in the story, increasing awareness of their suffering. Erasure, on the other hand, reduces or omits aspects through passivisation, nominalisation, abstraction, or outright exclusion, often hiding responsibility or complexity. In environmental texts, this can obscure polluters by framing damage as agentless ("the land was poisoned") rather than attributable ("corporations poisoned the land"). These processes are influenced by ideology, reflecting and reinforcing

worldviews; in petro-fiction, they can naturalise exploitation, making it seem inevitable rather than open to challenge.

Applying this to *Oil on Water* allows a dissection of how Habila constructs an ecological worldview. Does the text highlight the Delta's vibrant pre-oil vitality or its current desolation? Are corporate actors erased through grammatical evasion, shifting blame to abstract forces? This framework illuminates not authorial intent but the text's discursive effects, exposing stories of ambivalence where human agency is eclipsed by systemic inevitability. By integrating Stibbe with postcolonial ecocriticism, the study shows how such language choices perpetuate neocolonial power dynamics, where the Global North's energy demands invisibly harm the South. This approach helps readers challenge destructive narratives, encouraging stories that prioritise sustainability and justice.

Methodology

This research employs ecolinguistic tools to analyse linguistic patterns in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (Penguin Books, 2010). Data collection involved close reading of the entire novel, selected for its rich ecological imagery and narrative complexity. Data collection involved multiple immersive readings: an initial overview to understand thematic developments, followed by targeted scans for passages depicting environmental interactions, pollution impacts, human-nature relationships, and actor portrayals (Edem & Aluya, 2023). Guided by Stibbe's (2015) concepts of salience and erasure, criteria included sensory descriptions, grammatical structures (such as active versus passive voice), and omissions of causality. This process generated a corpus of excerpts from various chapters, covering diverse settings like polluted villages, oil flares, and reflective monologues.

From this, four excerpts were chosen for detailed analysis; expanded from an initial five to include a wider range of textual evidence, ensuring coverage of the novel's progression from early encounters with degradation to final ideological reflections. Selection focused on excerpts that illustrate recurring patterns, such as vivid pollution imagery or agentless constructions, while avoiding

spoilers to preserve narrative integrity. The analysis involved a multi-step process: first, clause-level parsing to identify actors, processes, and beneficiaries; second, evaluation of descriptive elements for sensory impact and prominence; third, detection of omissions through implied but unstated elements; and fourth, synthesis to link micro-features to macro-ideologies. The discussion integrates findings to argue for the novel's ideological framing, offering a systematic, repeatable approach to ecolinguistic literary studies.

Data analysis and discussion

This section examines five excerpts from *Oil on Water*, using Stibbe's salience and erasure to demonstrate how Habila's language portrays the Delta's crises, creating an ideology of widespread yet obscured devastation. In Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, the very first portrayal of the Niger Delta functions as more than simply a backdrop for the unfolding story; it signifies a profound act of ecological and narrative framing. An ecolinguistic analysis of the opening passage reveals the interaction between visibility and omission. An ecolinguistic analysis of the opening passage reveals the interactions between visibility and omission. In doing so, Habila establishes an ideological framework filled with systemic inevitability and a pervasive sense of resigned tragedy, leaving the reader in a state of reflection long after the words have been read.

Excerpt 1 (Chapter 1)

"The air was thick with the smells of rotten vegetation and petroleum, a foul miasma that seemed to have seeped into everything—the houses, the trees, the water, the people. The water itself was the color of strong tea, and iridescent with a film of oil, and when the breeze blew, it didn't refresh; it brought a stifling heat and a reminder of the poisons it carried." (Habila, 2010, p. 5)

Habila's carefully crafted prose creates a multi-sensory experience from that opening line, a key technique he uses to ensure it remains vivid in the reader's mind. It is not enough for him to simply state that the environment is polluted; he forces the

reader to engage with it on a sensory level, immersing them in a way that makes the degradation feel tangible and unavoidable. This engagement goes beyond just reading words, challenging the reader to not only visualise but also to feel the weight of despair hanging over the Niger Delta. The passage begins its vivid description by focusing on smell, which is universally regarded as the most primal and emotionally powerful human sense. The phrase "thick with the smells" turns the abstract idea of polluted air into something almost tangible, something that demands effort to confront. The connotative strength of the word "thick" makes the air seem less like a gaseous mixture and more like a solid, oppressive substance, requiring active effort to move through it. In this context, the contrast between "rotten vegetation" and "petroleum" becomes especially meaningful. "Rotten vegetation" suggests a natural world that should be involved in cycles of growth, renewal, and life; yet here, it depicts stagnation and death. When paired with "petroleum," a symbol of human industry and toxicity, these elements do not simply coexist but combine into a repulsive, singular entity—the "foul miasma." The word "miasma" carries historical weight, often associated with disease and decay, evoking images of a pervasive, plague-like threat that infects everything it touches.

Central to the effectiveness of this descriptive passage is the verb "seeped." This term conveys connotations of insidiousness and continuity, suggesting a slow, creeping infiltration rather than a sudden, catastrophic event. Pollution does not burst forth in a violent flash; instead, it saturates the environment gradually and imperceptibly, as if it has infiltrated every nook of existence. This gradual encroachment feels inevitable, an existential reality that has "seeped into everything." The structure of the subsequent list—a chilling progression from inanimate objects ("the houses") to the botanical realm ("the trees"), then to elemental forces ("the water"), and ultimately to humanity ("the people")—deliberately dismantles any hierarchical order. This effective linguistic strategy conveys a sense of shared demise, binding the landscape, its flora,

and its inhabitants in a collective state of toxic immersion. They all succumb to the same blighted essence, thus portraying the ecosystem as an integrated, contaminated whole.

Visually, the water acts as another vessel for Habila's intricate use of salience, presenting what could be seen as a perverse beauty within tragedy. When he describes the water as "the colour of strong tea," he paints a familiar and arguably comforting image, yet this sense of comfort is sharply undermined by the following clause, which states it is "iridescent with a film of oil." Iridescence, often linked with captivating beauty and rarity—think of a peacock's plume or a delicate soap bubble—takes on a startling, even terrifying new significance here. What appears stunning at first glance turns out, upon closer inspection, to be a lethal façade, a shimmer of life-imbued beauty masking a dire threat. This cognitive dissonance deepens the reader's understanding, transforming what might seem a straightforward remark about "dirty water" into something far more profoundly unsettling.

Furthermore, the concluding clause of this excerpt presents what can be regarded as the *pièce de résistance* in terms of literary power and emotional resonance. The breeze, a universal symbol of refreshment and vitality, is twisted and corrupted through Habila's pen. Instead of providing relief, it "didn't refresh; it brought a stifling heat and a reminder of the poisons it carried." Here, the author brilliantly anthropomorphises the breeze, depicting it not as a benevolent, life-giving force but rather as an emissary of death and decay, starkly "bringing" forth a "reminder" of the toxic consequences pervading the environment. The deliberate subversion of this expectation heightens the severity of the ecological calamity portrayed, compelling the reader to confront the idea that even nature's most innocent acts have been tainted in this broken landscape.

While the visceral impacts of pollution are presented with striking clarity and immediacy, Habila's writing notably lacks discussion of the causes and responsible agents of such environmental destruction. The ideological framing of this passage reaches its most powerful

and complex stage in the very absence of explicit actors. Time and again, we see the environment described in passive terms: the air was thick; the miasma seemed to have seeped; the water was iridescent; the breeze carried poisons. Curiously missing from this bleak tableau are the human agents responsible for the degradation—the multinational corporations whose pipelines fracture and leak, the government bodies that choose to ignore regulatory measures, and the overarching global economic structures that sustain dependence on oil and its harmful effects. By not naming these actors, the text renders this ecological catastrophe a tragic inevitability, one that appears to exist in a vacuum of responsibility rather than as the consequence of deliberate human actions and decisions.

The nature of the primary agent in the narrative is, therefore, distinctly abstract. The phrase "a foul miasma" functions as a metonymy, a linguistic device that allows it to stand in for the complex oil industry and its widespread repercussions. In doing so, the miasma loses its specific character; it becomes an ambiguous, indistinct presence that remains untouched by human responsibility. Similarly, the word "poisons" lacks detail; they are not identified as recognisable chemical substances like benzene or toluene, and no clear markers of accountability are present in this ecological disaster. The overall effect of this abstraction leaves the reader confronting a vast, enigmatic problem that seems overwhelmingly insurmountable. The embedded ideological narrative here expresses a sense of helplessness; if one cannot identify the enemy, how can one ever organise an effective response against it? The combined impact of Habila's sharp focus on the immediate impacts of pollution, along with a skilfully crafted absence of the causes behind it, constructs a compelling ideological narrative that resonates deeply throughout the reader's experience. The narrative thrusts them into a setting where ecological and human suffering dominate the forefront: immediate, visceral, and haunting. This evocation of empathy is profoundly impactful; however, it runs the risk of directing that empathy towards a narrative laden with tragic resignation rather than sparking

outrage or calls for justice and accountability.

The overarching narrative woven by Habila leans less towards crime and punishment and more towards a sense of predestined fate, resonating with a deep resignation to the ecological destruction of the Delta. This idea echoes themes discussed by scholars such as Rob Nixon, who have examined the concept of “slow violence”—a form of harm that develops gradually, invisibly, and often without immediate consequences. However, in Habila's framing, the agents behind this slow violence appear as linguistic phantoms, creating a situation where the perpetrators largely evade accountability. Consequently, the narrative subtly shifts blame onto the very essence of oil, portraying it almost as a supernatural curse rather than addressing the actions of those who extract and profit from it. This powerful framing unintentionally reinforces the dominant power structures underpinning petro-capitalism, naturalising the devastating impacts of oil extraction and depicting them as an unchangeable aspect of the global order. The story evokes profound sympathy for those affected, while simultaneously obscuring potential routes to accountability. Ultimately, it offers a poignant and tragic account that encapsulates a persistent sadness, which risks diminishing the drive for political activism by depicting a world suffering eternally without agents, teetering on the edge of ecological catastrophe.

Excerpt 2 (Chapter 4)

"A giant flame shot into the sky from a tall chimney, lighting up the surrounding forest and the wide, sprawling complex of the oil station. It was a terrifying sight, this eternal flame that burned day and night, flaring off excess gas, a symbol of wealth and power and wasteful destruction."

(Habila, 2010, p. 42)

In the excerpt from Chapter 4 of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, a vivid image captures the reader's attention through its depiction of a flame emerging from an oil station. The line “A giant flame shot into the sky from a tall chimney, lighting up the surrounding forest and the wide, sprawling

complex of the oil station” conveys multiple ecological and ideological significances, showcasing Habila's subtle linguistic approach. The impact of this passage mainly stems from Habila's deliberate choice of adjectives that give the flame a sense of grandeur and terror. Words such as “giant,” “terrifying,” and “eternal” not only enhance the visual intensity but also imply an ominous permanence to the destruction caused by the oil industry. By illustrating the flame as “lighting up” the forest, Habila introduces a duality: while the light may symbolise exposure, clarity, or hope, it paradoxically reveals a scene of devastation. The contrast between natural beauty and industrial machinery underscores a tension between the attraction of economic progress and the environmental disaster it entails.

Idealising the flame as an almost divine entity, the narrative presents the oil station's operations as more than just an economic activity. Instead, they possess a nearly mythical quality that influences the landscape, turning nature into a fleeting witness to this industrial spectacle. This personification of the flame, imbued with agency through vigorous verbs like “shot” and “lighting,” uses the literary device of animated nature to emphasise themes of domination and destruction, prompting readers to confront the inherent violence of such activities. The phrase “a symbol of wealth and power and wasteful destruction” further complicates the narrative by linking economic prosperity with ecological harm. This tripartite structure suggests that wealth and power are not merely byproducts of oil extraction but active agents in causing ecological degradation. The “eternal” flame signifies both the ongoing exploitation of resources and the relentless destruction inflicted upon the environment, embodying a neoliberal idea that equates profitability with sustainability; a fundamentally flawed premise that Habila criticises. Here, the language compels the reader to face the paradox of wealth accumulation built upon the ruins of the environment.

Furthermore, the adjective “wasteful” becomes crucial in the discussion of ideological framing. It suggests inefficiency and irresponsibility, indicating that resources are

squandered not only physically (through leaks and flaring) but also morally, in terms of human and ecological costs. The use of this term prompts questions about the sustainability of such practices, emphasising the reader's awareness of the destructive norms ingrained within the oil industry, an area often associated with excess but lacking accountability.

Contrasting the vivid imagery of the flame is the erasure clearly woven into the narrative. The mention of "the wide, sprawling complex of the oil station" is especially revealing; it evokes a sense of vastness and scale, yet strangely omits any reference to the human actors involved: executives, local labourers, or environmental activists. By leaving out the presence of agency, Habila creates a scene where the oil station appears almost as an autonomous entity, lacking culpability or direct human involvement. This linguistic choice encourages the reader to see ecological degradation in isolation, without considering the complexities of responsibility in the socio-political landscape of the Niger Delta.

The flaring, a practice of burning excess materials, is depicted as an inherent feature of the oil production process rather than a consequence of poor oversight or systemic negligence. Phrases such as "a symbol of wealth and power and wasteful destruction" stand out not only as critical indicators of the broader discourse on environmental justice but also reveal ideological tendencies where destruction is viewed as a byproduct of a larger system rather than the result of individual actions. Such constructions convey a normalised narrative of industrial ecocide, in which oil production is seen as an unavoidable aspect of economic progress and technological advancement. The reader is left with the impression that destruction is not only accepted but expected as a natural part of operations, an ideological stance that sustains a cycle of resignation and helplessness regarding environmental crises. Habila subtly critiques this perspective by highlighting the inherent contradictions within the oil industry, urging readers to consider the consequences of viewing ecological ruin as merely a background to corporate spectacle.

In this excerpt, the intricate interplay of salience and erasure created through Habila's linguistic choices forms a compelling ideological narrative. The imagery of the eternal flame not only captivates readers but also evokes a visceral understanding of the destructive effects of petro-capitalism, while simultaneously minimising the roles of those responsible for these harmful practices. As we analyse the text through an ecolinguistic framework, it becomes clear that Habila's portrayal is intentional, framing a narrative that urges the reader to reflect on the intersection of power, ecology, and accountability within the context of one of the most urgent crises of our time. It ultimately highlights the urgent need for a more responsible and just discourse surrounding natural resource exploitation and its disastrous consequences for both communities and the environment.

Excerpt 3 (Chapter 7)

"We saw a dead bird, its feathers plastered to its body by oil, its beak open as if in a last silent cry. It lay on a rock, surrounded by a black halo. Rufus took a picture. 'This is what they want to see,' he said." (Habila, 2010, p. 78).

This passage encapsulates Habila's broader thematic exploration of the tragedy caused by oil extraction and serves as a key point for analysing the interplay between language, ideology, and environmental perception. Initially, the imagery of the dead bird immediately draws attention, enabling readers to visualise the grim fate faced by wildlife in a polluted habitat. The phrase "its feathers plastered to its body by oil" highlights the tangible effects of environmental degradation. The choice of the verb "plastered" is particularly important; it conveys a sense of violent immobilisation and helplessness, suggesting that the bird, once vibrant and alive, has been reduced to a tragic spectacle by the encroaching oil—a metaphorical representation of the fate awaiting the inhabitants of the Delta. This language choice evokes pity and horror, creating what is known in ecolinguistic terms as a salient image. This vivid description underscores the severity of environmental destruction while embedding a deeper emotional resonance concerning loss.

Moreover, the phrase “its beak open as if in a last silent cry” heightens the sorrowful imagery and infuses the scene with a sense of urgency. The anthropomorphism here gives the bird a human-like quality of mourning; its final act of silence starkly contrasts with the chaotic environment around it. The use of “silent cry” captures not only the individual trauma of the bird but also symbolises the broader voicelessness of the ecosystem, which suffers in silence from the ravages of the oil industry. This multidimensional approach to representation reflects what Rob Nixon describes as “slow violence,” as it does not merely depict immediate destruction but also the gradual, creeping annihilation of complex ecological interdependencies.

However, the reflection from Rufus, “This is what they want to see,” introduces a crucial meta-commentary on media representation and the commodification of suffering. On one level, it invites readers to consider the ethics of consuming images of violence and tragedy, as it reveals an uncomfortable truth about how narratives depicting environmental destruction are often filtered through sensationalism for broader audiences. In this sense, stories that arise from such imagery tend to favour simplified accounts of victimhood over complex systemic critiques that would hold powerful institutions responsible for the devastation. This nuanced critique is closely linked to Habila's use of erasure as a linguistic strategy. By presenting the dead bird without directly naming the agents of its death—namely, the multinational corporations that exploit the resources of the Niger Delta—Habila's narrative actively conceals human accountability in favour of portraying a seemingly inherent environmental tragedy. The bird, in its gruesome state, becomes a symbol of countless other life forms caught in the web of environmental destruction, yet the absence of specific attribution to the corporate forces responsible allows a narrative of inevitability to develop. This omission supports an ideological framing of the tragedy as fated, rather than a result of deliberate human actions. As a result, the environmental crises appear inescapable, woven into the very fabric of life in the Delta rather than seen as a political issue that can be addressed.

Additionally, the poetically evocative image of “surrounded by a black halo” further highlights the severity of the situation. The “black halo” can be viewed as a visual symbol of death and pollution, emphasising what should represent purity and beauty. The natural world has been twisted into a sign of decay and sorrow. The flowing combination of beauty and horror is typical of Habila's style, as he contrasts the aesthetic with the horrific, exposing a dissonance that resonates within the reader's sense of beauty in nature amid the ugliness of human exploitation. The ethereal meaning of a halo, which usually signifies sanctity, is transformed into a symbol of loss, prompting the reader to confront the paradox at the heart of the struggle for justice in the Niger Delta; a region once cherished for its environmental wealth that is now reduced to a scene of ecological mourning.

This excerpt serves a dual purpose: it powerfully demonstrates the tangible impact of environmental destruction while also criticising the reductionist nature of media narratives surrounding such tragedies. By emphasising the connection between the personal (the dead bird) and the political (Rufus's declaration), Habila heightens the importance of how these texts are consumed, encouraging readers to reflect on their roles as consumers of stories and as advocates for change. The implications of this passage extend beyond the novel's narrative, engaging with wider discussions on environmental justice and the profound moral issues linked to representing ecological disasters. Ultimately, this small yet compelling excerpt acts as a crucial point where the ideological framing of environmental stories unfolds, exposing the complexities of human-nature relationships; the pain of loss intertwined with the harsh realities of guilt and apathy.

Through Habila's meticulous crafting of this scene, an intricate interplay of salience and erasure becomes apparent, highlighting not only the immediate environmental tragedy but also prompting readers to confront the underlying ideologies that allow such devastation to persist. The excerpt emerges as a poignant commentary on how narrative shapes our understanding of ecological crises, offering an illustrative lens

through which readers can engage with the environmental realities of the Niger Delta and the wider implications of resource extraction on a global scale.

Excerpt 4 (Chapter 10)

"The pipelines, he said, were old and rusted and leaked all the time. The oil companies would come and patch one leak and another would appear somewhere else. It was a futile game. The whole land was soaked through with oil." (Habila, 2010, p. 112)

In this selected excerpt from Chapter 10 of *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila offers a powerful image of the environmental damage caused by oil extraction in the Niger Delta. The description of ageing pipelines that are called "old and rusted" and the phrase "leaked all the time" act as a visceral testament to the ongoing and systemic neglect of environmental safety by oil firms engaged in extraction practices. Here, the importance of linguistic choices becomes clear, especially in how they shape the narrative's ideological framing around blame and impact.

The phrase "the oil companies would come and patch one leak and another would appear somewhere else" highlights several points of interest. Firstly, the use of the modal verb "would" indicate a habitual action rather than a committed response, implying a lack of urgency or genuine intention to address the root of the problem. This depicts the oil companies as being more reactive than proactive, operating in a cycle of temporary fixes rather than implementing lasting changes to prevent future leaks. The phrase emphasises the futility of these efforts, as they are characterised as merely a "futile game." This characterisation evokes a sense of inevitability and resignation about the environmental crises, as if the challenges faced by the ecosystem cannot be overcome by corporate intervention, thereby normalising the ongoing degradation of the Delta.

The syntactic structure in this excerpt plays a crucial role in shaping reader perceptions. The passive construction "the whole land was soaked through with oil" emphasises the land's victimhood while simultaneously erasing the responsible parties; the oil companies themselves.

The land becomes a passive recipient of damage, absorbing oil without any active attribution of blame. This linguistic choice signifies how the text manoeuvres to displace accountability, transforming environmental devastation into an overwhelming force of nature, as if the land's submersion in oil is a natural occurrence rather than an act of human negligence and greed.

Furthermore, by describing environmental loss in such a detached way using words like "soaked" and "futile", readers may be encouraged to see the ongoing crises an unavoidable destiny that the people of the Niger Delta must accept, rather than a problem with identifiable villains who can be held responsible. The mention of "leaks" repeatedly appearing almost implies a natural cycle of disaster, rather than a state of emergency that requires urgent and constant attention from those in power. This promotes the underlying ideology that interprets ecological destruction not as a human-made disaster but as a loud background noise in the foreground of social and political life, making it harder to find opportunities for agency and action against the structural forces of petro-capitalism involved.

The erosion of agency extends beyond industry actors; it includes the people whose lives are irrevocably changed by this negligence. Habila's language depicts the plight of local communities not just as victims but as entities continuously caught in a web of disillusionment. The cyclical process of damage described in the excerpt emphasises the suffering of the ecosystem without providing it with recognisable faces of corporate agents, making the ecological devastation appear stark and personal, yet systematically depoliticised. Thus, this excerpt becomes a crucial site for understanding how Habila employs linguistic strategies to evoke strong emotional reactions while simultaneously obscuring the mechanisms of action and culpability. It warns against a narrative that uncritically accepts the fragmentation of responsibility inherent in such environmental discussions. Indeed, while the environmental tragedies are made poignantly clear through vivid imagery—where one can almost visualise the oil-saturated land—it is essential to examine how

these representations may neglect a vital investigation into the broader socio-political influences that sustain such conditions.

This tension within Habila's text prompts readers to question the implications of their own interpretations of the narrative. As such, it can serve as a call for awareness, encouraging critical discourse that recognises and challenges the hegemonic structures behind ecological degradation. Ultimately, this excerpt exemplifies the complex interplay of salience and erasure in *Oil on Water*, challenging readers to confront the unsettling truths of ecological sacrifice for economic gain. Through nuanced language, Habila captures both the sensory immediacy of environmental destruction and the ideological machinations that make such devastations part of a cyclical narrative devoid of accountability—thereby reinforcing systemic inertia in the face of ongoing suffering in the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

Through this ecostylistic lens, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* demonstrates a skilful use of linguistic strategies that present the Niger Delta's petro-crises as a tapestry of vivid suffering and hidden culpability. Salience, achieved through sensory-rich descriptions and agentive attributions to nature's wounds, immerses readers in the visceral reality of pollution; dead rivers, blazing skies, and silenced communities, fostering

empathy and urgency. However, erasure, conveyed through passives, omissions, and depersonalisation, systematically minimises the presence of the architects of this destruction: multinational firms and state enablers. The outcome is an ideological construct of tragic ambivalence, where destruction appears as a totalising, almost cosmic force, overshadowing opportunities for specific resistance or reform. This framing not only criticises the invisibility of "slow violence" but also embodies it, reflecting how global discourses often naturalise exploitation in resource-rich peripheries. T

he study's implications extend to broader literary and environmental scholarship, advocating Stibbe's framework as a versatile instrument for dissecting eco-texts. It invites comparative applications to other petro-narratives, like those of Ben Okri or non-fiction Delta accounts, to probe the role of language in justice movements. In a world grappling with climate inequities, Habila's novel, linguistically decoded, serves as a call to action: by unveiling erasures, we can rewrite stories toward accountability and restoration. Ultimately, the text doesn't merely narrate disaster; it linguistically enacts it, compelling readers to confront a reality where evidence abounds, yet redress remains shrouded in the shadows of words unspoken.

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