

## ECOLOGICAL MOTIFS AS STYLISTIC EXTENSION IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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### **Abstract**

This research has examined ecological motifs as stylistic extension in interpreting and depicting human relationships with the environment. The study has explored plot and diction as aspects of style visible in the representation of setting as an ideological landscape for environmental degradation and human exploitation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010). The semantic interpretation and ecological motifs are wrapped on the influence of diction on literary creativity—a lexical perspective that captures lack of responsibility, betrayal and dishonour for both humans and the surroundings. The semantic implication is deeply connected to eco-diction—a universalized literary choice and use of words, especially with regard to effective communication on ecocritical concerns visible in the deliberate depiction of accidental occurrences in the selected novel.

**Keywords:** Eco-Narratives, Motif, Eco-Diction, Style

### **Introduction**

Various attempts have been made by scholars to use ecological motifs as a stylistic extension in literary discourse. The nature and function of this use amount to the integration of linguistic analysis, environmental themes, imagery, and symbolism into literary texts to improve their aesthetic, thematic, and ideological perspectives. In the context of Nigeria, ecological narratives have been conceptualized as voices of nature with fresh sensitivity on human representation of landscapes, non-human creatures and human destructive activities (Lundbald 2001:1; Bagu 2010: 189). These activities have produced notable and indigenous ecological writers such as Tanure Ojaide, *sidore Okpewho*, Kaine Agary, Chimeka Garrick, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chris Abani and others who have dealt with ecological issues caused by flooding, pollution, human abuse and poor management in their selected novels. The central motif of their novels acquires the desire to improve the exploited humans and degraded environment. The lexical items and motifs within these novels often serve as contextual metaphors for human experiences, societal conditions, and philosophical worldview, enriching the narrative while also foregrounding ecological consciousness and criticism. With the dilemma enumerated above, we connect Anne Dobie's perception of ecocriticism as the depiction of man and his environment in literature. Within these eco-narratives, nature as reflected in landscapes, flora and fauna presents a panorama of vivid topography in the mind creating images of degradation, exploitation, destruction and helplessness. These are captured representations of the state of affairs or societal issues—the reflection of human state of mind in the aftermath of destruction. A close observation would notice the setting as a visible stylistic device in the eco-narratives alongside other devices like metaphor, symbolism, imagery, personification and animism. The plots of the novels are always woven around indigenous ecological perspectives that spur creative output and public utterances for activism.

Notably, eco-narratives are collapse-centered, hence the need to raise awareness on ecological crises and environmental sustainability for the unity of man and his social contexts. The critical voice in this study is relevant in exploring environmental components such as a “body of water—the ocean, ponds, lakes, rivers, lakes; the soil— plains, hills, and rocks; plants, trees, flora and fauna, flowers’ and the atmospheric air in which the seasons play their roles” (Dasylyva 2022: 421). Therefore, the synergy in

literary documentation is wrapped on the interconnectedness of human existence or experiences and the planet earth—a critical stance that foregrounds literary expression and ecology within a people’s worldview, language, tradition, values and cultures.

A deeper reasoning considers literary expression from the linguistic and semiotic stances oscillating between human-oriented and ecology-oriented approaches. The evidence of this symbiotic interconnectedness in linguistic current is visible in “Habila’s narrative technique and linguistic choices which function as a call to action, aligning with ecocritical discourses that prioritize environmental sustainability and community autonomy” (Ogungbemi, 2024:360). From ecological perspective Habila’s depiction assumes the concept of literature as a communicative art in expressing linguistic current and semiotic mould of landscapes, flora, and fauna to symbolize emotion and occasional psyche in relation to social issues replete in the study. Her fictional narrative, no doubt offers a degree of consciousness and response to ecological concerns that serve as literary activism in the wake of destructive interaction and collapsing civilization. Within the body of Habila’s eco-narrative, the setting plays a conscious role with the imagery of decaying and polluted landscapes—a degree of consciousness which is significantly all encompassing in the use of ecology-diction. This ecology-diction falls into Abrams (2004) critical perspective of style as a manner of linguistic expression in a given narrative—the pattern any speaker or writer has adopted in depicting experiences, both fictional or non-fictional. In literary criticism, this should be related to literary stylistics—a perspective on style by Leech and Short (2007) which interprets the usage of language within a context. The implication is that in any ecology fictional narrative, linguistic stylistics presents perspectives synonymous with the environment and people’s worldview. This in turn shapes and offers special attention to geographical location, regions, tribe—and intricately, their ecological worldview and challenges.

### **Ecological Motif as Stylistic Consciousness in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water***

According to Ifeoma Odinye (2020), “a common ground visible in all literary texts is the aspect of style which influences creativity” (52). This form of literary evaluation is sipped from the pattern of language expression visible in the arrangement of actions, events and characters’ experiences within a given cultural context. Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010) is written with an underlying assumption in linguistic analysis of *Petrofiction* (Riddle 2021)—a narrative fictional form which depicts the pollution of environment, suffering and death of humans. From Halliday’s perspective, the level of semantics in the title, *Oil on Water* is primarily a pointer to Niger Delta crisis with its “complex historical and political antecedents” (Chinaka 2011). The title of the novel offers semantic interpretation on Nigeria’s socio-cultural experiences on the issue of Niger Delta and crude oil spillage. To acquire a social and cultural meaning, the title captures a vehement passion directed at subordinate personalities with purposeful influence that make Niger-Delta a living *Hell*. The prominence of semantic extension employed in the novel brings to limelight a weeping literature—what Charles Nnolim categorized as a literature of lamentation caused by capitalist orientation—a reflection on imperialism and colonialism. The implication is that the narrative contributes to reality and advances social revolution on the abundant brutalities of capitalist oppressors without negotiation. In this connection, the lexical perception of the title evokes Sule Emmanuel Egya’s ideology that fictional narratives on Niger Delta region of Nigeria with its patterned destruction of environment and inhabitants falls within a genre termed “literary militancy” (2017:94). This ideology is a form of discourse attributional to environmental and human militancy—a form of human right abuse against humans and the environment. The implication is that the environment is captured by humans in a degrading manner and humans are held hostage by humans who feel deprived of a better environment and sources of livelihood. One thing is clear, they write against environmental pollution and degradation because, their environment determines their commercial engagement and occupation. The apparent ideology conceived by Egya is woven on “literary militancy—the desire of Nigerian writers of South-South or Niger Delta region to employ fictional narratives as instruments of literary documentation and cultural imagination in addressing human suffering in the wake of environmental pollution. The central motif of Habila’s novel is captured on the title with a vivid image of “oil on water”—an expression which acquires a contextual meaning within the ecological narrative. Since the subject-matter of Habila’s novel is region-bound, understanding the narrative is predicted on the meaningful interpretation of ecological-bound diction in the novel. From the perspective of semantics, there are two levels of

meaning in the title: the L1 potential interpretation which finds a casual interpretation of environmental casualty as an ordinary occurrence; and the L2 interpretation, the deep contextual meaning captured on ecological sensibility. In the context of the novel, the L2 interpretation acquires an additional meaning—a region-bound interpretation typical of Niger Delta ecological issues—an escapade that is injurious to both mankind and the environment. From the reading of the novel, *Oil on Water*, we know that Niger Delta indigenes owe their region an allegiance of defence and protection in the euphoria of petrodollars and oil companies—a societal wave which releases toxic elements that pollute their air, land and ocean bodies. Of course, the result of this awareness has given birth to local militias who are in constant battle with soldiers deployed by the government to secure oil companies. The consequences of their clash result to the suffering of the local communities—a pattern that revolves around physical violence and death. These occurrences are cohesively related through ecological praxis the need to consciously evoke a collective resistance against environmental degradation and atmospheric pollution. Therefore, the central theme of this novel is ‘degradation’ preoccupied with the symbiosis of man and his environment. The ecological sensibility of Habila’s novel is wrapped around ecological destruction with stylistic significance visible in the plot, setting, diction, and symbolism as major elements.

### **Plot as an Aspect of Style in *Oil on Water***

The plot is a stylistic element that foregrounds ecological narratives in Habila’s novel. The plot of the novel is intricately non-chronological and traumatic with useful flashback as a technique of recollection. The mechanics of the author’s storytelling is replete with ecological “comings and goings”—the specific ordering in “revelations, discoveries”, conflicts and actions of ecological resistance (Abrams 2012:12; Ezeaku 20:2014). The structure of the actions of Habila’s plot is ordered to achieve emotional and artistic effects built on ecocritical sensibility. Helon Habila tells the story of two journalists who are wrapped around various issues of environmental degradation, insecurity, corruption and political instability that plagued the people. The novel details the kidnapping of Mrs. Floode who was kidnapped by the militants—a group of local militias who requested a huge sum of money as ransom from the ‘oil-rich’ husband. These are people who are grieved about the neglect of the environment and the nonchalant attitude from the government, and the multinational oil corporations’ destructive activities which invariably have led to death, sickness, and kidnapping. Notably, Habila intertwines the personal stories of his characters with the broader political and ecological crisis in the Niger Delta. The plot of the story exhibits patterns of storytelling with a force of discourse on violence and ruination—a form of eco-literary narrative that advocates for physical and psychological liberation.

Rufus’s recollection of his family's struggles and Zaq’s fading career as a journalist are interspersed with harrowing depictions of environmental degradation. For instance, Rufus’ perception and description of ecological hazard is replete with dark pattern of personal narration of morbidity: “The air was thick with the smell of burning gas... the trees on either side of the river were blackened skeletons, their leaves long gone, their branches holding nothing but smoke” (*Oil on Water* 37). This vivid imagery of death-like fixation situates the characters’ personal suffering within the context of widespread ecological devastation, demonstrating how the political and environmental intersect with the lives of individuals. The plot’s constant shifts between the two realms emphasize the inescapable entanglement of the personal and the political.

The beginning of the novel is expository in nature. It reveals the consequences of ecological concerns resulting to unwholesome horror of moral decay caused by ecological depletion—the kidnap of Mrs. Floode, the wife of oil-rich—Mr. Floode. The novelist furnishes the readers with specific ecological facts that have set off a chain reaction of events on environmental degradation through the devastating impact of oil extraction on the environment and communities in the Niger Delta. This disjointed timeline reflects the disorientation felt by the characters as they navigate the complexities of life in the Niger Delta. Early in the novel, Rufus recalls the beginning of their journey with specific information which the readers need to understand ecological experiences: “We set off in the morning, the sun glinting off the water as the canoe skimmed along the winding river...” (*Oil on Water*, 2). One major thing that Habila did in the narrative is to maintain a certain degree of ecological openness. It is this openness that gives room to the development of the ecological narrative. The above excerpt is a sudden shift to memories of his sister, Boma, his budding career as a journalist, and his encounters with the

consequences of oil exploitation. Following the underlying instability which revolves around ecological conflict and occasional transitions in eco-narratives that disrupt the narrative flow—one must not fail to see the structural collapse echoing the uncertainty and instability in both Rufus’s personal life and the Niger Delta’s societal structure. By not adhering to a linear timeline, Habila creates a style that mirrors the chaos and fragmentation of the environment. The loose plot becomes a metaphor for the disarray caused by the oil exploration conflict and the destruction it leaves in its wake.

Rising action of the novel reveals complex issues surrounding the people, the government, and the militants. The involvement of Rufus, and Zaq in the investigation brings suspense—a decision that has triggered and brought deep thoughts behind the reasons for the kidnapping escapades. Rufus and Zaq’s journey to the Niger Delta expostulates the fulfilment to investigate the kidnap of a British oil engineer. As the narrative delves deeper, a complex web of corruption, violence, and environmental degradation unfolds with a binding force. Within the main plot of this narrative, there unfolds a unique twist of fate. This twist however comes in the novel with the discovery that Salomon, the driver has a hand in the kidnap—an act of human cruelty he employed to take revenge on his boss who slept with his wife. Specifically, the central quest to locate Isabel Floode heightens the layer of suspense in the narrative thus engaging the reader while also serving as a vehicle to explore deeper themes. Considering the journey of Rufus and Zaq—their significant travel through the riverine terrain, their encounter wrapped in mysteries that are often unresolved—one would perceive an obvious fragmentation in depicting events in an uncertain atmosphere. For instance, in the deserted village, Rufus observes a perceived tension in the environment and limitation in people’s situation: “The huts stood empty, the ground littered with charred wood and broken pots. It was as if life had been wiped clean from the place” (*Oil on Water*, 112). These moments of suspense draw readers into ecological uncertainty, the desecration of an environment—a patterned disillusionment replete with the larger uncertainty of life in the oil-polluted Delta. This ecological fragmentation becomes an artistic sense—a style that shifts the readers’ focus from solving the mystery to uncovering the harsh truths of exploitation, survival, and loss.

The peak of the story is captured from the perspective of Irekefe, the local guide, a depiction which has exposed ecological concerns of the Niger Delta people, their lifestyle marred by vandalism and chaos—the reasons for bunkering in their stance for exploitation. This revelation is realized on the arrival of Rufus and Zaq in their vacillation between duty and environmental chaos. This environmental chaos has resulted to Zaq’s death within the Niger Delta region.

Notably, descriptive vignettes of the Niger Delta’s landscape, is replete with environmental degradation caused by oil exploration. These vivid descriptions and interruptions slow the pace of the story, compelling the reader to absorb the scope of the destruction. The scope of realistic mode of depiction uses environmental elements coated in the dilemma of environmental criticism: “The river was coated with a thin film of oil that shimmered in rainbow colors under the sun. Dead fish floated belly-up, their eyes clouded and lifeless” (*Oil in Water* 54). Basically, such vivid descriptions are not mere background details but integral to the plot’s style. One of the ecocritical concern here is that, these sociological depictions shift the reader’s attention from the immediate events to the broader environmental catastrophe, reinforcing the thematic praxis and implicit stance of the novel.

In the plot structure, the action falls with a declining seriousness when Rufus encounters a group of militants fighting against the oil companies and the government. It is essential therefore to know that the plot further projects the complex and nuanced nature of the conflict. Beyond the search for Isabel, the novel delves into the conscious backstories of its characters, weaving subplots that deepen the befuddled narrative. Rufus’s memories of his sister Boma, who was taken away by militants, highlight the human cost of the crisis. In reading the text, one gets the impression of the ecological-war which comprises of violence—an immediate experience that excludes people’s voices from the canon of existence. This observation is aptly expressed by Rufus in the excerpt here: “I remember her screaming, her hands clawing at the air as they dragged her away. I wanted to run after her, but my feet wouldn’t move” (*Oil on Water* 89). Similarly, Zaq’s health challenges perceptively reveals the deterioration of journalistic integrity as well as the physical unpleasant consciousness of uncovering the truth in a corrupt society. From the wealth of narrative within the subplots, we perceive the credible pictures

which not only enrich the characters but also reflect the wider impact of the Niger Delta's plight with escalating emotional resonance of retrogressive nature.

Besides the psychological unpleasantness of conflicts, the novelist creates an environmental-identity in the denouement. The critical conflict of the story is resolved as Rufus uncovers various webs of corruption and deceit by the government and oil companies—a cankerworm which has eaten deep into the hollows of the Niger Delta community at the expense of the people. The fragmented plot style reflects the chaos and brokenness—physical and psychological struggles of the Niger Delta people, a region torn apart by oil exploitation and conflict. No doubt, the non-linear structure and episodic storytelling have created a fictional sense of real dislocation, mirroring structural disorientation and the disintegration of both the physical environment and the social connections of inherent the system.

Rufus's journey, marked by disjointed encounters and unresolved questions, symbolizes the lack of coherence in a world shaped by greed and violence. Habila is ambivalent as he handles the resemblance of events in the Niger Delta which involves environmental degradation, exploitation, negligence, corruption, violence, the power of journalism, identity, and a fragmented sense of belonging. These critical perspectives are well situated in an ecological-setting arranged to aptly trigger the consciousness of the readers to the prevalent issues in the Niger Delta. The loose nature of the plot is a deliberate stylistic choice that enhances the novel's traumatic and thematic concerns—a pattern which exposes heightened dehumanization and environmental degradation. Justifiably, the non-chronological structure is replete with interwoven narratives, suspense, descriptive pauses, and character-driven subplots that contribute to a fragmented pattern—a collapse of human agitation in the face of exploitation. This carves in an aura of verisimilitude—the fulfilment of a profound storytelling style.

#### **Diction as an Aspect of Style in *Oil on Water***

The multiple facets of words employed by a literary artist in a narrative are the tools of his or her artistic creation (Odinye 2020:56). In fact, the linguistic feature is an aspect of a narrative that enhances the plot, setting of the story and the relationships between characters. Therefore, style is perceived as a “choice of linguistic elements”—a reflection of norm and a departure from a norm with consistent ideological influence and “repetitive linguistic forms” (Ahgu 2017:94). Notably, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is characterized by a foregrounded linguistic device within his Niger Delta region narrative. Specifically, his style of ecological conscious writing is not typically unusual, but has the conspicuous ecocritical elements that make a reader to create mental images with great attention. There are also personalized patterns in his narratives—a deliberate deviation from his depiction of experiences which is very obvious in his style of writing.

Habila's choice of words in *Oil on water* are rich in ecological aura, imagery, deep and surface meanings figuratively embedded in witty, poetic, colloquial and didactic forms—a pattern of expression which shows ecocritical perspectives in connectivity and sensibility. The use of concrete words is not just ornamental, but speaks truth to reality with a deep aura of plausibility in the side of the writer, the characters and the conscious readers. Habila's deployment of words like ‘feverish’, ‘bats’, ‘dead birds’, ‘coiled snake’, ‘petrol-soaked’, ‘contaminated water’, ‘nature’, ‘dead birds’, ‘quenchless flare’, ‘cholera’, ‘typhoid’, ‘deaths’, ‘blackish water’, ‘expressionless water’, ‘expressionless eyes’, ‘foul smell’, ‘savage’, ‘decaying flesh’, ‘rape’, ‘restless’, ‘kidnap’, ‘militants’, ‘redemption’, ‘mother earth’, ‘spirits’, ‘worshippers’, ‘stench’, ‘ripped’, ‘barrenness’, ‘oil slick’, ‘sadness’, ‘poverty’, ‘punctured roof’, ‘trees’, ‘forest’, ‘oil spillage’, ‘children’, ‘women’, ‘sickness’ and ‘livelihood’, shows his deep resolve to manifest ecological praxis and consciousness in his narrative.

Habila's wit of words is well weaved and has displayed a significant imaginative freedom to keep the readers in suspense, emotional connectivity, and apt understanding of the ecological trends in the novel. The sociopolitical and economic factors that framed the vision of the novel in the euphoria of exploitation question the means of survival of the have-nots. The writer's sensibility is captured by Rufus who gives a nostalgic description of the life lived in the Niger Delta before and after the discovery of oil:

Once upon a time they lived in paradise... they lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was close

knit... (but now) the close, unified community was divided... tempted... with a lot of money, more than any of them had ever imagined.... (*Oil on Water* 38)

Rufus' sensibility tends to expose more sensitive discovery on political and economic upheavals. From an ideological perspective, the oil brought perpetual exploitation of the masses by the privileged class, disunity, fragmentation, pollution and destruction of the environment—oppression and mismanagement by government functionaries. Habila's diction is wrapped around sensitive ideological perspective—a tool for fanning the ambers of radical ecological abuse. In the novel, there are chaotic patterns visible in the novel such as the use of coercive language, manipulative language and abusive language. Habila's use of language is subtly radical—a form of physical and mental neglect of humans and the ecosystem. A vivid picture of the abuse of water bodies is captured here: "Over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fish or other water creatures—we were alone..." (*Oil on Water* 17). The social depiction in the novel as unambiguously expressed reflects Habila's disgust for ecological degradation and human exploitation. Habila's *Oil on Water* shows his disgust for social injustice—a depiction which meets the linguistic prerequisites for ecological diction. The novel employs a distinctive diction that reflects the novel's motifs and characters as well as the all-encompassing issues of the Niger Delta region.

The ecological narrative presents a lucid motif wrapped in poetic lyricism—a narration which gives vivid descriptions of the natural world as well as the characters' emotions. The emotional and physical landscapes of the story capture the struggles and resilience—the characters' stance in the wake of ecological issues. The use of imagery and descriptive language paints a mental picture of the political and social atmosphere in Niger Delta as well as the people's personal experiences. The pedigree of language use in the novel brings in a nostalgic effect for periodical juxtaposition. Rufus' reminiscence of his childhood at Chief Ibiram's house strikes an opposite sense of existence in a plundered environment:

...my childhood (was) in a village... the sea was just outside our door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to our lives. Boma (his sister) and I used to spend the whole night by the water, catching crabs, armed with sticks and basket.... We usually sold our catch to the market women, but sometimes, to make more money, we took the ferry to Port Harcourt to sell to the restaurants by the waterfront. That was how we paid our school fees. (*Oil on Water* 26)

No doubt, Habila's choice of words reveals Rufus' nostalgia which by implication is a pointer to the fact that man derives a lot of benefits from nature as it supports him in the attainment of his goals. Gloria's stance in the novels lends credence to this nostalgic effect. Her confession of good old days when Islands around her used to be a big habitat for bats, but now have a few due to the gas flares that kill them (*Oil on Water* 120), is a pointer to the deep harm caused by ecological destruction. Relevant is the projection of dark radicality in expression of ecological menace as captured in the excerpt here: one sees "...dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots.... the patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil..." (*Oil on Water* 8).

Also visible in the novel are the use of metaphor, irony, satire, and symbolism to convey complex ideas on destructive human activities on the environment. Irony and satire are used to critique the social and political systems that perpetuate corruption, vandalism, inequality and injustice as well as highlighting the complexities and nuanced contradictions of modern Niger Delta society. The excerpt below speaks volumes to buttress this perspective:

Where did the people go? Dem left because of too much fighting. The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village center like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass... Over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fish or other water creatures—we were alone. (*Oil on Water* 15)

Rufus' descriptiveness draws a sharp contrast between the present and the past in terms of the physical environment of his community. The massive pollution of their environment vividly describes how "unrewarding the villagers' efforts at seas are, as they merely succeed in catching a handful of thin wiggling fish" (*Oil on Water* 25). In fact, Habila's creative ingenuity is accessible via his massive use of imagery and symbols to create mental pictures of riverine areas like the Niger Delta, and how the people, the air, the land, and the water are overtly exposed to environmental hazards. In Habila's words, "the land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. That was when priests from different shrines got together and decided to build this shrine by the river. The land needed to be cleansed of blood and pollution" (Habila 128). Habila's use of language is replete with empathy for the Niger Delta people who are fishermen and mostly make "their living on the river that poured its water into the sea" (*Oil on Water* 108).

Habila's depiction is laced with imagery of decay and disillusionment—a patterned description of horrific actions of man which have adversely affected the ecosystem, resulting in terrible consequences for all. The linguistic representation of certain levels of destructiveness is apt in the excerpt below:

The village looked as if an epidemic had swept through it...we went from one squat brick structure to the next, from compound to compound, but they were all empty, with wide-open windows askew on broken hinges, while overhead the roofs had big holes through which strong sunlight fell. Behind one of the houses, we found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing, the maggots trafficking beneath the feathers. We covered our noses and moved on to the next compound, but it wasn't much different: cooking pots stood open and empty on cold hearths; next to them stood water pots filled with water on whose surface mosquito larvae thickly flourished.... (*Oil on Water* 7).

No doubt, Habila's use of language in the novel is not ambiguous. The use of simple, direct and emotional words conveys various experiences of Niger delta people to draw a sense of intimacy from the readers into the world of the novel. Notably, the use of riddles, colloquial language, and idioms to capture the speech patterns and dialect of the characters, adds authenticity and realism to the ecological narratives. The condition of natives is replete with misery—a state of disconnection from the land once lived in. From Chief Ibiram's perspective, we see a clear picture of this forceful detachment: "...always we've had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace, but it is hard. So, your question: are you happy here? I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home?" (*Oil on Water* 41). Chief Ibiram's voice is marked by a sense of disorientation with the rising insecurity in the euphoria of displacement. In fact, Habila's clarity of expression manifests more ecological concern in the excerpt here: "... Irikefe is now mostly ashes and rubble, bombed by the gun helicopter over there. Not a hut is left standing...What of the people? Expect a lot of casualties, unavoidable of course..." (*Oil on Water* 156).

The thematic ecological issues of the novel are unambiguously expressed to depict Habila's disgust about social injustice:

I've been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place. The villagers got quenchless flare then the livestock began to die and the plants wither on their stalks I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab. I measured the level of toxins in it. In one year, it had grown almost twice the safe level. People started dying. More people died, more fell sick, a lot died. Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear. A man suddenly comes down with a mild headache, becomes feverish, develops rashes, a vital organ shuts down. Those whom disease doesn't kill, violence does. (*Oil on Water* 142)

No doubt, Habila's narrative reveals the sordid griminess and toxicity of the water and lifestyle of the people in the Niger Delta. The linguistic prerequisite is wrapped around ecological poetic language with strong sense of regional identity. The novel's use of evocative descriptions as reflected in metaphor, symbolism, irony, and satire adds emotional depth and nuanced complexities to the ecological narrative—a pattern of depiction replete with literary activism.

## Conclusion

In this study, an attempt has been made to examine plot and diction as aspects of style visible in the representation of setting as an ideological landscape for environmental degradation and human exploitation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010). It has been discovered that the underlying ecological subjects and thematic preoccupations shown in Habila's novel such as the oil, the oil companies, the rivers, the dead bodies, the militants, the kidnapped victims, the governments, and the people—are symbolic in the conscious depiction of the Niger Delta setting. Habila's socio-political and economic ideological outlook is framed from the vision of Niger Delta consciousness for environmental liberation—a soul searching narrative that requires self-reflection and self-examination in the perpetuation of exploitation of the masses by the privileged class. The setting is crucial in actualizing the central story and ecological undertone of the narrative which diction fashioned into the plot—the deliberate intensification of critical spirit in the detailing of actions and incidents. Habila's diction has created a vivid social outlook that directed the writer's energy to literary activism in the wake of ecological concerns. In fact, Habila's diction is replete with a radical spirit that informs ecological sensibility spurred by indigenous oppression that questions both human and economic survival. *By extension*, *Oil on Water* has revealed horrible contemporary experiences sipped out of reality—a serious encounter with oil spillage, violence, militancy, and conflicts in the Niger Delta and the Nigerian society at large.

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