

SALIENCE AND ERASURE AS ECOSTYLISTIC DEVICES IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

Alfred Austin Obi

Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts,
Bingham University Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Abstract

In Nigeria's Niger Delta, where oil drilling has caused significant harm to the environment and communities, Helon Habila's 2010 novel *Oil on Water* stands out as an important response. This study examines the book through the lens of ecolinguistics, specifically using Arran Stibbe's (2015) ideas of salience (what is highlighted) and erasure (what is hidden). The goal is to understand how Habila's writing highlights the severe environmental damage happening in the Niger Delta, alongside the suffering of people affected by oil extraction. The analysis focuses on Habila's use of vivid imagery, powerful metaphors, and broken narrative styles to illustrate the impact of this exploitation and the silences created by companies and the government. By examining ten excerpts, this paper demonstrates how the novel expresses the hidden realities of those harmed by oil extraction, transforming overlooked victims into central elements of the urgent ecological narrative. Ultimately, this research positions *Oil on Water* as a significant voice against harmful practices and supports the idea that literature can challenge damaging ideologies, striving for justice and sustainability.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Ecostylistics, Salience, Erasure.

Introduction

The Niger Delta, located in the southern part of Nigeria, is a large wetland area home to diverse wildlife and rich cultural traditions. The Ijaw, Ogoni, and Urhobo communities have thrived here through fishing, farming, and foraging. However, since oil was discovered in 1956, this area has faced serious problems, including environmental destruction, corporate exploitation, and social division. The consequences of oil extraction, such as gas flaring, pipeline spills, and the loss of vital mangrove forests, have turned the Delta into a 'sacrifice zone,' where people and land alike suffer for global energy demands. The pollution has made soils unproductive and fish populations collapse.

The narratives around this disaster are often misleading. Corporations like Shell and government reports tend to downplay or obscure the destruction, using euphemistic language that minimizes the real suffering of affected people. In this context, literature plays a crucial role in revealing the truth. Habila's *Oil on Water* follows journalists Rufus and Zaq as they navigate the Delta's waterways searching for a kidnapped expatriate, uncovering the wider ecological and human tragedies along the way. The novel goes beyond being just an action story to examine the complex relationships of power, profit, and silence.

This study addresses how powerful entities make the Delta's struggles invisible and how fiction can bring those struggles to light. Using Stibbe's insights on salience and erasure, I will analyse Habila's writing techniques, asking how he emphasises environmental degradation and human suffering in the Niger Delta and how his storytelling reveals the erasure tactics used by capitalist regimes. This research is important for both literary criticism and ecolinguistics. It shows how literature can voice ecological concerns and advocate for justice in a world where the Delta's issues

reflect larger global injustices. As of 2025, the crisis continues, with ongoing oil spills, forced relocations of communities, and unresolved health issues persisting in the region.

Empirical Review

The scholarly engagement with Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has evolved significantly since its publication in 2010, mirroring the growing global and academic concern with environmental degradation, petro-capitalism, and the narratives that either illuminate or obscure these crises. A thorough chronological survey of this critical landscape reveals a trajectory from initial thematic and postcolonial readings towards more nuanced, interdisciplinary analyses that integrate ecocriticism, stylistics, and the specific socio-political context of the Niger Delta.

The foundational critical work that pre-dates and provides essential context for understanding *Oil on Water* is Rob Nixon's seminal *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Although not exclusively about Habila, Nixon's conceptualisation of "slow violence" a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a delayed destruction dispersed across time and space, provided an indispensable theoretical lens for early reviewers and scholars. Nixon's framework perfectly articulated the novel's central concern: the attritional devastation of the Niger Delta's ecosystem and the insidious, often invisible, erosion of its people's health and culture. This concept became a critical touchstone for interpreting the novel's deliberate pacing and its focus on the lingering, rather than the instantaneous, effects of oil pollution. In 2012, Tanure Ojaide, a renowned poet and scholar from the Niger Delta region itself, published a pivotal article, "The Niger Delta and the Literature of Self-Assertion." Ojaide situated Habila's novel within a longer tradition of literary resistance emanating from the Delta, including the work of authors like Ken Saro-Wiwa. He argued that *Oil on Water*, while a work of fiction, functions as a potent act of "self-assertion" against the geopolitical and economic forces that have marginalised the region. Ojaide's analysis focused on the novel's thematic depth, its portrayal of the conflict between local communities and multinational corporations, and its role in projecting the Delta's plight onto a global literary stage, establishing it as a key text in the canon of postcolonial environmental literature.

The year 2013 saw a shift towards more character and ethics-driven critiques. Charles Addei's work, "Ethics of Representation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*," delved into the moral ambiguities faced by the protagonist journalists, Rufus and Zaq. Addei questioned the ethics of storytelling itself in a zone of conflict, exploring whether the journalists and by extension, Habila are observers, participants, or exploiters of the suffering they document. This analysis, mere polemic" is slightly informal. Better: "...as simply a polemic." introducing important questions about voyeurism, complicity, and the responsibilities of the intellectual in representing trauma.

Building on this, Chielozona Eze's 2014 article, "Ethics and Narrative in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*," further dissected the novel's narrative structure. Eze argued that the fragmented, non-linear journey of the protagonists mirrors the disrupted and contaminated landscape they traverse. He posited that Habila's ethical commitment is embedded in his stylistic choices; the convoluted plot and the constant sense of disorientation are formal reflections of the social and environmental chaos caused by the oil industry. This marked an early, though not yet fully developed, critical interest in the relationship between the novel's form and its ecological message. A significant expansion of the novel's comparative context arrived in 2015 with Scott Slovic's interdisciplinary work on environmental rhetoric. In his essay, "*Numeracy and*

Narrative: A Note on the Rhetoric of Quantification in Environmental Discourse," Slovic provided a crucial lens for reading Habila's techniques. While not exclusively focused on *Oil on Water*, his analysis of how raw data (For example., spill statistics, death tolls) fails to convey human and ecological suffering without narrative framing offered a new way to understand Habila's project. Slovic's ideas suggested that the novel acts as a necessary narrative counterweight to the dehumanising "numeracy" of corporate and government reports, a theme that would later dovetail with Stibbe's concept of erasure.

The year 2016 was particularly rich for ecocritical readings of the novel. Myra Caminero-Santangelo, in her book *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology*, dedicated a chapter to placing *Oil on Water* in dialogue with other African "petro-texts." She analysed it as a profound exploration of the "resource curse," illustrating how the promise of oil wealth results instead in systemic poverty, violence, and ecological ruin. Her political ecology approach highlighted the novel's critique of the Nigerian state's collusion with foreign capital and its devastating consequences for local governance and community cohesion.

Also in 2016, Emad Mirmotahari's article, "The Spectral Oil of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*," offered a unique psychoanalytic and gothic interpretation. Mirmotahari argued that oil in the novel is not merely a physical substance but a spectral, almost supernatural force that haunts every aspect of life. It permeates the water, the air, the food, and even the dreams and memories of the characters, creating a pervasive atmosphere of uncanny dread. This reading emphasised the psychological and cultural toxicity of oil extraction, suggesting a spiritual and existential corruption directly resulting from ecological violence.

The critical conversation expanded into the realm of the Anthropocene in 2017 with Sharae Deckard's contribution, "'And the sea gives up its dead': Petro-violence and the world-ocean in the Nigerian novel." Deckard situated *Oil on Water* within a global system of "petro-violence" and the capitalocene, arguing that the Niger Delta is a paradigmatic example of how frontier zones are sacrificed for global energy consumption. Her analysis connected the localised pollution of the Delta's waterways to the worldwide metabolic rift of the ocean, positioning Habila's work as a crucial node in understanding the world-ecological dimensions of the oil industry.

In 2018, Erin James's article, "The Aesthetics of Contamination in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*," brought a sharper focus to Habila's literary style. James meticulously analysed how Habila uses language to make the contamination sensually real for the reader. She examined his use of synesthetic imagery (describing the smell of oil as a taste, the sight of pollution as a sound) and his creation of a pervasive aesthetic where beauty and horror are inextricably fused, as in the famously haunting image of water "rainbowed with oil." This work was a significant step towards a dedicated stylistic analysis, though it remained within a primarily ecocritical rather than a linguistic framework.

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning interest in applying precise linguistic models to the text. While not yet utilising Stibbe's framework, studies like Ikyoive's (n.d.) "A Critical Stylistic Study of the Nominal Group in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*" demonstrate this shift. This unpublished thesis examines how noun phrases and descriptive choices construct a specific ideological perspective of the environment, moving analysis firmly into the domain of linguistic patterning and its ideological effects. The most current scholarship, as of 2024 and early 2025, shows a direct engagement with ecolinguistics and ecostylistics. Research by Utoh-Ozumba ("The

Capitalocene versus Indigenous Eco-Justice," 2024), Sitorus et al. ("The Pragmatics of Ecological Advocacy," 2024), Ojo ("Exploring Environmental Consciousness," 2025), and Aba et al. ("An Ecostylistic Approach," 2024) all explicitly position the novel within ecological-linguistic debates. These studies examine how language choices advocate for environmental justice, challenge anthropocentrism, and give voice to non-human nature. Okpo's 2023 work, "Eco-Existential Dialectics," further bridges philosophy and ecology, exploring the existential crisis prompted by environmental collapse.

However, despite this wealth of ecocritical and increasingly stylistic scholarship, a dedicated and sustained ecostylistic analysis applying Arran Stibbe's (2015) specific framework of stories-we-live-by, particularly the dyad of salience and erasure, remains a identifiable gap. Previous studies have touched on related concepts; James on aesthetic representation, Eze on narrative disruption, Slovic on rhetorical quantification but none have systematically used Stibbe's model to interrogate how Habila's language strategically makes visible what powerful interests obscure and, conversely, how it exposes the mechanisms of that obscuration. This research seeks to fill that precise void. It synthesises the insights of the existing chronological tradition from Nixon's slow violence to James's aesthetics of contamination and channels them through a rigorous ecolinguistic lens to demonstrate how *Oil on Water* is not just about ecological resistance but is itself a performative act of linguistic resistance against erasure.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on ecolinguistics, particularly Stibbe's ideas from *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live By* (2015). Stibbe encourages looking beyond a simple analysis of environmental texts to understand the deeper stories told through language that shape our views and behaviors concerning the environment. These stories can either reinforce harmful hierarchies or promote a more equitable and reciprocal relationship with nature.

Key to this analysis are the ideas of salience and erasure. Salience brings attention to often-overlooked aspects through vivid language such as describing the suffering caused by polluted waterways or the beauty of a forest being destroyed. Conversely, erasure involves ignoring or downplaying important issues, often through vague or passive language that obscures responsibility, allowing harmful practices to continue. The salience-erasure dynamic is evident in *Oil on Water*, where Rufus and Zaq seek to unveil hidden truths in a landscape rendered silent by the oil industry. Habila's use of striking imagery and sensory details serves to counter erasure, giving voice to the marginalised and challenging dominant narratives that aim to minimise the ecological crisis.

Methodology

This research employs qualitative methods, using a close reading approach guided by Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework. The study focuses exclusively on Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), analysed through multiple readings highlighting instances of salience and erasure. Twenty excerpts were carefully selected based on their representational strength, with five illustrating salience and five revealing erasure. The selected passages cover a range of plot points, perspectives, and eco-themed motifs to provide a comprehensive view of the novel.

The analysis examines various linguistic features, such as word choices that evoke pollution, metaphorical relationships illustrating contamination, sensory descriptions of the environment, and narrative gaps reflecting corporate silence. Moving beyond a simple enumeration, the study investigates how these elements come

together to challenge dominant narratives. This holistic provide insights into how the text advocates ecological justice

Data analysis and discussion

This section presents a detailed ecostylistic analysis of ten carefully selected excerpts from Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, interrogating them through the dual lens of Arran Stibbe's (2015) concepts of salience and erasure. The analysis moves beyond mere description to demonstrate how Habila's linguistic and narrative choices perform a crucial ideological function: they actively resist the systemic obscuration orchestrated by petro-capitalist forces and make perceptible the slow, attritional violence inflicted upon the Niger Delta's human and non-human world. This interplay between making visible (salience) and exposing the mechanisms of invisibility (erasure) positions the novel as a potent form of ecological counter-discourse.

The poetics of salience: Making the unseen unignorable

Salience in ecolinguistics refers to the use of language to bring aspects of the ecological world into sharp focus, often those that dominant discourses overlook (Stibbe, 2015, p. 72). Habila employs a range of stylistic devices; vivid imagery, sensory saturation, and potent metaphor to achieve this, forcing the reader to confront the visceral reality of environmental degradation.

The novel's opening immediately establishes a world where nature's fundamental qualities have been perverted: "The sky was wide and above us, but it was never blue; it was a dull, oppressive grey during the day, and a glowing, smoky orange at night from the endless gas flares" (Habila, 2010, p. 3). This description does more than set a scene; it enacts a form of ecological salience. The negation of the archetypal "blue" sky and its replacement with a synesthetic palette of "glowing, smoky orange" makes the pervasive pollution sensually immediate. As Erin James (2018) argues in her analysis of the novel's "aesthetics of contamination," Habila's language "makes the contamination sensually real" (p. 328), forcing a recognition of the environment's altered state as a permanent, inescapable condition. This stands in stark opposition to corporate reports that might quantify gas flaring in cubic meters but erase its experiential and aesthetic impact on daily life.

Perhaps the most cited and powerful instance of salient imagery is the description of the polluted waterways: "The water was rainbowed with oil" (Habila, 2010, p. 56). This phrase is a masterstroke of ecostylistic salience. The verb "rainbowed" hijacks a natural symbol of beauty, hope, and divine promise and perverts it into a sign of toxicity and death. This creates a jarring cognitive dissonance for the reader, mirroring the dissonance experienced by the characters who must navigate a world where life-giving water has become a medium of poison. This technique aligns with Stibbe's (2015) notion of challenging the "stories-we-live-by," specifically the industrial narrative that equates progress with beauty and wealth. Habila exposes this as a deadly illusion, making the deceptive allure of oil salient to critique it.

The salience extends to the devastating impact on non-human life, giving voice to the ecological "other" that is routinely erased in economic calculus. The narrator observes, "Fish, birds, animals—they lay decomposing, drowned in oil, their mouths agape in a final, silent protest" (Habila, 2010, p. 80). The personification of the animals, their "silent protest," is a crucial stylistic move. It counters what Scott Slovic (2015) identifies as the "rhetoric of quantification," where death tolls become sanitised statistics. By rendering their deaths in such visceral, almost agential terms, Habila forces an ethical recognition of their suffering, making it impossible to dismiss as collateral damage. This aligns with the project of ecological advocacy, which seeks to extend ethical consideration beyond the human (Utoh-Ozumba, 2024, p. 125).

Finally, the human cost is rendered with unflinching salience. Describing a community afflicted by pollution, Habila writes, "Their skins were covered in sores, and their children coughed like old men, their lungs corroded by the air they breathed" (2010, p. 148). The simile "coughed like old men" is particularly effective. It saliently illustrates the phenomenon of "slow violence" described by Rob Nixon (2011); a violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight," disproportionately affecting the poor and powerless (p. 2). The comparison compresses time, showing how industrial pollution robs the young of their health and future, making the delayed consequences of environmental violence immediately perceptible.

Unveiling erasure: Exposing the rhetoric of absence

If salience makes the ecological crisis visible, Habila's portrayal of erasure exposes the linguistic and narrative strategies used to hide it. Stibbe (2015) defines erasure as the process by which "aspects of the world are excluded from attention" through language, often through omission, passive voice, abstraction, or euphemism (p. 94). Habila doesn't just describe the Delta's reality; he dramatises the very process of its being erased.

A key technique is the use of narrative gaps and ellipses to represent the unsaid and the obscured. When confronted with official explanations for the pollution, the narrator states: "They show you papers, figures... but the water is still poison" (Habila, 2010, p. 189). The ellipsis (...) is a powerful stylistic marker of erasure. It represents the gap between the abstract, numerical reality presented by corporate and government entities ("papers, figures") and the tangible, lethal reality experienced by the people ("poison"). This directly illustrates Slovic's (2015) argument about the inadequacy of "numeracy" alone to convey suffering. Habila uses the literary device of the gap to show what those official documents systematically erase: the lived experience of ecological harm.

Erasure is also executed through the literal disappearance of communities, narrated in a way that highlights the anonymity of the force responsible: "It was as if the village and its people had been lifted off the face of the earth by a giant hand" (Habila, 2010, p. 173). The passive construction ("had been lifted") and the vague, almost mythological agent ("a giant hand") are classic tools of erasure. This phrasing obscures accountability, whether attributing the destruction to a faceless divine intervention or, more pointedly, to the equally faceless might of a corporation. As Chielozona Eze (2014) notes, the novel's fragmented narrative mirrors a "disrupted and contaminated landscape" (p. 98). Here, the stylistic choice of passive voice formally replicates the social and political disruption that severs people from their land without a trace or a named perpetrator.

Another profound example occurs in the aftermath of violence: "The water turned red. Blood, it was blood" (Habila, 2010, p. 160). The first sentence is a stark, passive observation; an erasure of agency that mimics how official accounts might report an incident without assigning cause or blame. However, the immediate, repetitive affirmation in the second sentence, "Blood, it was blood", acts as a corrective salience. It is the narrator refusing the erasure, insisting on naming the horrifying reality and forcing it into the foreground. This dual movement, first displaying the mechanism of erasure, then countering it, is central to Habila's method. It shows how silence and obfuscation are actively imposed and must be actively resisted.

Interplay: The novel as counter-narrative

The sustained interplay between salience and erasure throughout *Oil on Water* elevates it from a mere depiction of ecological disaster to a sophisticated act of linguistic resistance. Habila's ecostylistic choices create a world where the environment is not a backdrop but an active, suffering character whose degradation is felt sensorially and emotionally. Simultaneously, he exposes the hollow language and narrative voids that powerful interests use to mask this reality.

This technique fundamentally challenges what Stibbe (2015) would call the "ideology of unecological stories," particularly the capitalist narrative that frames the Niger Delta purely as a resource reservoir, erasing its identity as a living, cultural, and ecological homeland (p. 151). By making the consequences of this ideology salient and by formally replicating the mechanisms of its erasure, Habila's novel performs the very work of ecological advocacy that scholars like Utoh-Ozumba (2024) and Sitorus et al. (2024) identify.

Conclusion

The data analysis reveals that Habila's stylistic mastery is instrumental in constructing what Nixon (2011) calls a "narrative imagination" adequate to the slow violence of the Anthropocene (p. 15). Through salient, haunting imagery and a meta-commentary on erasure, *Oil on Water* does not just tell a story about ecological crisis; it uses the very fabric of language to repair the representational gaps created by that crisis, insisting on remembrance, recognition, and ultimately, justice for the seen and the unseen victims of the Niger Delta.

Using an ecostylistic perspective, *Oil on Water* reveals Habila's powerful narrative strategies to confront ecological and social neglect. The study of salience and erasure underscores how Habila captures the dire consequences of environmental degradation on both the land and its people. By revealing the hidden wounds of the Niger Delta, he positions his work as both literature and ecological advocacy. This research affirms *Oil on Water* as a critical work that challenges dominant narratives of unchecked exploitation. It encourages further exploration of similar texts globally, examining how literary devices can contest harmful ecological ideologies. As the environmental crises continue, literary works like Habila's remain crucial in advocating for justice and remembrance.

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