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A Linguistic Stylistic Analysis of Helon Habila's Waiting for an Angel and Oil on Water

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ABSTRACT

This study is a linguistic stylistic analysis of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel and Oil on Water*. This research investigates the linguistic and stylistic features in both text and the stylistic significance of Habila's choice of style. It also identifies recurrent linguistic features in both texts. This research follows the method of analysis of style outlined by Leech and Short. The research made use of primary and secondary data. The primary data consists of excerpts randomly extracted from the fictional works selected for this study. The secondary data consists of both published and unpublished materials on related and relevant topics. This study reveals that Habila is consistent in his style of writing. It is observed that for every linguistic feature and stylistic device examined in *Waiting for an Angel*, there seems to be a similar recurrence in *Oil on Water*, except for a few. Habila's style conforms to the concepts of style which see style as a choice and as a deviation. This work has been able to establish that the style of the text is manifest in the linguistic features of the text. This research has revealed that Habila has been consistent in his style since there are more recurrent linguistic features in both texts than there are diversities.

Keywords: Linguistic, Helon Habila's, Angel, Oil and Water.

INTRODUCTION

Style may be regarded as a choice of linguistic elements, as departure from a norm and as repetition of linguistic forms. Style can be seen as the characteristic pattern of choices associated with a writer or the pattern associated with particular periods, genres or literary movements. Taylor (1981) [1] states that "style is a function of the uses of language. It involves words choice and arrangements or patterns or phrasing. Any

discussion of style must begin with acknowledgement of these characteristic expressive devices or techniques and so on” (83).

Abrams (2005)[2] says that “style has traditionally been defined as the manner of linguistic expression in prose or verse—as *how* speakers or writers say whatever it is that they say” (303). Leech and Short (2007)[3] state that style “refers to the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose...” (9). Linguistic stylistics is one of the most effective ways to investigate the distinction between what is said and how it is said, or between the content and the form of a text. Linguistic stylistic analysis will set forth objectively the relevant methods that will ultimately contribute to the interpretation of prose. The objective study of linguistic expressions in literary and non literary materials has kept the concept of a linguistic stylistic analysis afloat.

Stylistics is the study of style; it is the study of language in literature. It seeks to account for the interpretative value of a text through close study of its linguistic detail. Stylistics is the description and analysis of the variability of linguistic forms in actual language use. It acknowledges the skills of the writer by assuming that every decision made in the production of a text is deliberate, despite whether these decisions were made consciously or unconsciously. Thus, it aims to explain the link between linguistic form and literary effect, and to account for what it is that people are responding to when they praise the quality of a particular piece of writing or criticize it. According to Leech and Short (2007)[3], ...stylistics investigates the relation between the writer’s artistic achievement and how it is achieved through language. That is, it studies the relation between the significances of a text and linguistic characteristics in which they are manifest (56).

Linguistic stylistics presents a scientific analysis, working with such tools as grammatical, syntactic and phonological components of the language. It describes the elements of language used in conveying a certain subject matter. Linguistic stylistics is the form of stylistics whereby, its practitioners attempt to derive from the study of style and

language variation how a text can be understood. It is the study of literary discussion from a linguistic point of reference and it is concerned with the language codes and their construction. It describes the elements of language used in conveying a certain subject matter[4].

Helon Habila's works are characterized by foregrounded linguistic devices. His style of writing is unusual and is considered conspicuous because it catches the attention of the reader. The pattern in which he has presented his works captures certain deviations from the norm. This is made obvious by the choice of his style of writing. The success of both novels is determined by the conscious linguistic choices that Habila has made. These choices range from the organization of the subject matter, to the structure of the works and the grammatical variations. The choice of language use is referred to as the style. Eustace Palmer (1986)[5] states that "it is of course important to pay attention to what the novelist has to say; but it is equally important to pay attention to the way in which he says it (4)." The uniqueness of Habila's style provides the need for the linguistic stylistic analysis of his novels. *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water* are typical of Habila's style and contain some striking irregularities of form in comparison to 'traditional' prose.

THE CONCERN OF LINGUISTIC STYLISTICS

Azuike (1992)[4] states that the linguistic stylisticians "restrict their analysis of style to the affected text..." (114). Linguistic Stylistics categorizes and interprets the series of linguistic choices that are available to authors. It also identifies the ways in which features of linguistics may call attention to themselves. These features may deviate from the accepted norms in their manner of expression. These classifications may be applicable to a particular text or number of texts in such a way as to highlight their peculiar characteristics.

According to Carter and Simpson (1989), "Stylistics uses linguistic analysis to provide a window on the devices which characterize a particular work" (48). They made a

distinction between linguistic stylistics and literary stylistics. For them, “linguistic stylistics is the purest form of stylistics, in that its practitioners attempt to derive from the study of style and language a refinement of models for the analysis of language and thus to contribute to the development of linguistic theory” (4). Whereas, “ literary stylistics is more concerned with providing the basis for further understanding, appreciation and interpretation of avowedly literary and author-centered texts” [6].

Linguistic stylistics focuses on linguistic theories. Linguistic stylistics investigations rely on the rules of the language. William Russell describes linguistic stylistics and its importance as the fashion in current linguistic studies to involve considerations of style directly within the framework of grammatical reflections. Linguistic stylistics is concerned with a scientific study that involves applying linguistic techniques to a work of art with the aim of discovering the salient attributes and flaws of such a work. It is severe analyses of the work, examining how a unique pattern of language has been used in the realization of a particular subject matter, reckoning all the linguistic means that combined to achieve a particular artistic purpose. The result is supposed to be an objective assessment based on practical and realistic criteria[7].

LINGUISTIC FEATURES IN HABILA'S *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL AND OIL ON WATER* SENTENCES

Habila uses sentences with both simple and complex structures. Bars Aarts (1997), states that ‘sentences are not random collections of words, but strings of words which are organized according to certain rules’ (8). For the purpose of this research, we will explain a sentence as a string or sequence of words that makes complete meaning. According to their structure, sentences can be classified into simple, compound, complex and compound complex[8].

SIMPLE SENTENCE

A simple sentence is one that contains one subject and one predicate. A simple sentence can be called an independent clause. Stylistically, it helps the writer to express ideas in a straight forward manner. Habila makes use of the simple sentence quite often in both texts and this may be because of the possibility of the sentence type to convey a single idea. His use of the simple sentence in both texts is quite interesting because despite their frequent appearance, the work does not appear tacky or dull. Instead it captures the reality of everyday conversations in an exciting way. Even though the simple sentence can be found on almost every page of both texts, the other sentence types put together are used more often than the simple sentence. His works are obviously for the learned and this is evident in his sentence structure. Here are some examples from *Waiting for an Angel*:

I am a poet. (34)

I couldn't sleep. (39)

I'll become a writer. (73)

Examples of simple sentences in *Oil on Water*:

Zaq did not eat. (16)

She is gone. (17)

Zaq snored on. (66)

COMPOUND SENTENCE

A compound sentence has two or more clauses which are equal in status and functions. They are linked by one of these coordinating conjunctions: and, but, or, for, so, nor. The stylistic significance of the compound sentence is that it allows for the possibility of developing two or more independent ideas within a single structure. Habila uses this sentence type well. He is able to produce more ideas in one sentence using this type of sentence structure. He has been able to capture the salient issues that have bothered the Nigeria society in the past and also the troubling issues of the present. We notice this usage

more often in *Oil on Water* than we do in *Waiting for an Angel*. Examples in *Waiting for an Angel* are:

His head was clean-shaven; his eyes were hooded, dreamy. (34)

The paper was months old, but it did not matter. (80)

I had gone to crap and I found the door locked from inside, but he was just finishing. (85)

Examples of compound sentences in *Oil on Water*:

The army sent him away to this place as punishment, and he's been here three years now. (57)

The doctor led the way, and Zaq and I followed. (146)

COMPLEX SENTENCE

A complex sentence has two or more clauses. One of them is the main or independent clause; the others are the dependent or subordinate clauses. Stylistically, complex sentences allow for the subordination of one idea to the other, this is important because the subordinate ideas can shed more light on the main idea. Habila uses this type of sentence frequently in both works. Most of his sentences are weighty and do not leave the reader in doubt of the message he intends to communicate. This has helped to make his message and theme very effective and absolute. Habila has eyes for details and a vivid sense of imagination; he has been able to creatively capture the essence of the theme in both stories, through the use of the complex sentence and the bulk of these stories are told by the aid of this sentence structure. Examples in *Waiting for an Angel* are as follows:

He had to write in secret, mostly in the early mornings when the night warders, tired of peeping through the door bars, waiting impatiently for the morning shift. (1)

When I returned to the tenement house they were taking Nkem away. (84)

Below are examples of complex sentences in *Oil on Water*:

His son said he'd be taken to Port Harcourt, where he'd be tried and found guilty of fraternizing with the militants. (13)

When I got tired of thinking I descended to join the worshippers for dinner. (132)

THE COMPOUND COMPLEX SENTENCE

A compound-complex sentence is a sentence with two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. Elizabeth O. Brien explains that a compound-complex sentence is made up of a compound sentence and a complex sentence. The compound part of the equation means that the sentence has two (or more) independent clauses. The complex part of the equation means that the sentence has at least one subordinate clause. In *Oil on Water*, this sentence type was used very frequently to establish how complex the issue of

the Niger Delta is. There are so many twist and turns in the text and the stylistic significance of the compound complex sentence is that it helps create the intensity of the adventure and also emphasizes the complications of the unsettled problems of oil in the Niger Delta region since the situation in that region of Nigeria is a sensitive one. This sentence type is bulky and therefore carries a lot of message in it. It is also present in *Waiting for an Angel*. It conveys a lot of message at the same time because of how much words such a sentence can take. Habila takes advantage of this sentence type and uses it to tell two very interesting stories. Here are some examples from *Oil on Water*:

They were staring intently at us, but both immediately dropped their gazes as I turned to them. (37)

He left home early in the morning in a pickup truck to go to the bush, where he and his partner bought the petrol from the kids, and he returned home only after midnight, often drunk. (65)

Waiting for an Angel

He knows the name, he has read the man's work, though he has never seen him. (161)

My father only patted you on the back if you did well; and I had learned to duck under my mother's arms whenever she opened them. (141)

MINOR SENTENCES

A minor sentence is a fragmented, elliptical, or incomplete sentence or clause that still conveys meaning. It is also called a minor clause or a sentence fragment. A minor sentence does not necessarily have a main verb in it but can be understood as a complete unit of meaning. Minor sentences include exclamations, aphoristic expressions, answers to questions, self identification, imperatives and vocatives. Habila uses a lot of minor sentences. Both texts have a good number of this type of sentence and although he may

have used them a bit differently in both books these sentences express the jerky thought patterns which the author wants the reader to perceive.. In *Waiting for an Angel*, some of them are imperatives:

Search. More! (12),

Move! (15).

Answers to questions:

'A hundred this birthday.' (72)

No, a writer. Novels and poems. (73)

Exclamation:

In my prison! (13)

Oh, my God! (135)

Elliptical sentences:

Broken bottles. Barbed wire. (15)

Participle phrase fragments:

A walking distance, really. (141)

Here are a few minor sentences from *Oil on Water*:

Elliptical sentences:

- Bar Beach. (22)

- Beautiful. (23)

- Food, please. (25)

A student at the university. (56)

Answers to questions:

-Nobody. (7)

-Never too early. (5)

Aphoristic expressions:

Just a matter of time. (57)

SENTENCE AT THE RHETORICAL LEVEL

According to Abram (1999) in analyzing style, two types of sentence structure are often distinguished: The **periodic sentence and nonperiodic or loose sentence**.

PERIODIC SENTENCES

The main idea comes at the end of the sentence. This is done in order to create suspense and anxiety in the reader and to raise curiosity. The use of periodic sentence in the novels affords the author the opportunity to present his main ideas at the end of the sentence as will be seen from the examples below. This sentence type is intriguing and creates some level of suspense in the minds of the readers. A longing is created in the minds of the readers in the form of suspense and soon afterwards, it is satisfied. In the following examples, the main ideas are italicized:

Waiting for an Angel

In the middle of his second year in prison, Lomba got access to pencil and paper and *he started a diary*. (9)

...Lomba was seated in a dingy cell in Gashuwa, his eyes closed, his mind soaring above the glass studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom; then the door clanked open, and *when he opened his eyes Liberty was standing over him, smiling kindly, extending an arm*. (32)

Oil on Water

...I took the old man to one side and asked him if we needed to pay his brother for our board. The money would come out of our expense account anyway, and *the Chief has been a perfect host.* (33)

Looking at the proud smile on his face as he glanced up at his father, expecting a word of approval for having done his part, *I realized that all this while I hadn't even known the boy's name, or his father's.* (37)

The army sent him away to this place as punishment, and *he's been here three years now.* (57)

LOOSE SENTENCES

The loose sentence is the opposite of the periodic sentence; the main ideas come at the beginning of the sentence. The linguistic and stylistics advantages that the loose sentences offer is that Habila is able to achieve emphasis by placing the main ideas at the beginning of the sentences while the supporting ideas are placed afterwards. The readers come headlong with the most important ideas and without any delay they are aware of the theme of the story. Examples:

Waiting for an Angel

He had to write in secret, mostly in the early mornings when the night warders, tired of peeping through the door bars, waiting impatiently for the morning shift. (1)

I knew it was me he came for when he stood there, looking bigger than life, bigger than the low, narrow cell. (12)

Oil on Water

I can shoot you right now and throw you into the swamp and that's it. (59)

I fell into journalism out of necessity, not because I had proven talent like Max Tekena, or vision, or any ambition to be the next Zaq. (65)

PUNCTUATION

THE USE OF FULL STOP (.)

Punctuation refers to special marks used in writing that divides sentences and phrases. It is seen as an act of using marks to add meanings to expressions. Punctuation marks can be used by writers systematically in an organized way to perform certain stylistic functions that affect meaning in their works[9].

For stylistic reasons however, a writer may choose to deviate from what may be regarded as the normal or conventional use of punctuation. This is obviously noticeable in Habila's works. There is a violation of the rules of the use of full stop. This punctuation mark is used before a statement that expresses a complete thought but a deviation from this rule of grammar is notice in both works where he uses the period after single words, double words, or words that do not express a complete thought, and that should have belong to a sentence. This deviation from the norm by his stylistic use of a full stop is for the purposes of economy of word usage and clarity of meaning. This is to draw readers' attention to significant points and also to discourage ambiguity and misinterpretation. His deviation from the norm in the use of full stop in *Waiting for an Angel* also emphasizes a point about the psychology of the character of Muftau, the prison Superintendent in chapter one. It is no coincidence that the Superintendent's disjointed vocabulary corresponds to his chaotic and disruptive personality in the novel which in turn corresponds to the upsetting and chaotic effect of the military rule on the people and the society at large[10].

Examples:

Waiting for an Angel:

I will ask. Once. Who gave you. Papers? (13)

So, you won't. Talk. You think you are. Tough... You are. Wrong. (14)

Oil on Water:

Wait. Me, me. (20)

Tolu. (20)

Right. Tolu. (20)

THE USE OF DASH (-)

In both books, there is an extensive use of dash. In some cases it is to add information and in some, it is for stylistic effect. In *Oil on Water* he deviates completely from the norm in his use of dash and this in turn has enhanced the style of his writing. Sometimes it is used in front of some sentences and at other times it is used before a question. Examples:

Oil on Water

- Tell me, Rufus, my friend, what do we seek?
- The woman, and the professor.
- I said “what”, not “whom” (4)
- Isn’t it a bit to early?
- Never to early. Take a sip, Rufus. (5)
- Who lives there?
- The old man shrugged. -Nobody. (7)

In *Waiting for an Angel*, dash is not used in the same way that it is used in *Oil on Water*. It is noticed that the dash is particularly used to add information to something that has been said or mentioned and it is stylistically loaded. The dash here is rich with information. It is descriptive and it is also used contrastively. Examples:

Waiting for an Angel:

He was shot in the head - a chemistry student. (60)

One arm was fractured - it lay by his side in a thick plaster. (62)

Someone had taken a full-page notice to announce the happy event - only Alice didn't look that happy. (63)

He pulled out the chair next to the table for her - the only chair in the room. (69)

CONCLUSION

This study has been able to explain the concept of style and to outline the concerns of linguistic stylistics. The study has successfully carried out an analysis of some of the linguistic features prevalent in Habila's texts and has revealed that the style a writer uses is seen in the language used. The linguistic features present in Habila's novels places his works in a class of their own. He has created his own style which is very unique to him and which has come to stay.

The summary of the analysis carried out reveals that his concepts of style in both texts tilt toward style as a choice and style as a deviation from the norm. Several recurrent linguistic features are evident in both texts. Habila is seen to be consistent in his use of language in both texts. His use of punctuation is a linguistic strategy that has called attention to itself. He creatively weaves the several sentence types in his works into artistic and aesthetic forms.

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