



A Systemic Functional Analysis of the Nominal Group in Selected Eco-Critical Poems of Ebi Yeibo and G'ebinyo Ogbowei

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Abstract. This paper examines the Nominal Group in the ecopoetry of Ebi Yeibo and G'ebinyo Ogbowei. Both poets are of the Niger Delta literary tradition of protest literature. This literature is a reaction to the brazen exploitation of petroleum resources in the Niger Delta without compensation and environmental impact assessment by the Nigerian government and the international oil companies. Three representative poems are selected from different collections of the two poets. They are analysed using Systemic Functional Grammar as theoretical framework. The systemic functional analysis of the Nominal Group brings out the eco-critical features of the poems. An analysis of the MHQ structures throws up the vexed issue of environmental injustice and brings to the fore the struggle of the Niger Delta people for resource control.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Hydrocarbon, Environmental Injustice, Resource Control, Ecocriticism

1. Introduction

The discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956 sowed the seeds of what would later be a paradigm shift in Nigeria's political economy. Before oil became the cash cow of the Nigerian economy, section 140 of the 1963 Republican Constitution provided for 50% derivation (Federal Ministry of Information, 1963). This led to the economic empowerment of the regions, with groundnut pyramids, tin and hides and skin in the North; cocoa and allied industries in the West; and palm oil and coal in the Eastern Region. At this point in her economic history, Nigeria was on the path of development.

According to Ojarikre (2015) the military adventure into politics in 1966 halted this process and since then there has been a relentless slide towards economic doom. The non-return to "true federalism" in 1979 after the military interregnum fuelled this

slide. Successive governments (both military and civilian) abandoned the economic traditions of the past and concentrated on exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons without consideration for environmental impact assessment. This has led to a huge environmental disaster in the Niger Delta. The groundswell of discontent soon snowballed into open protests, defiance, vandalization of oil installations, hostage taking and militancy. It was the intellectual arm of the struggle for the economic liberation of the Niger Delta that threw up a corpus of literature called Niger Delta eco-critical literature.

This paper therefore aims to explore how the Nominal Group is used to expose the situation in the Niger Delta, using Systemic Functional Grammar as theoretical framework. This is with a view to identifying the features that reflect the Niger Delta predicament and the ideology of resource control.

2. Ecocriticism

Glottfelty and Fromm (1996) define ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Howarth (1996) looks at the origin and morphology of ecocriticism. "Eco" and "Critic" both derive from Greek "oikos" and "kritis", which together mean "house judge." Ecocritic could therefore mean a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature. Buell (2005) observes that ecocritical studies have also been enhanced by the formation of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) which has grown from a "localized North American ferment into a thousand-member organization with chapters worldwide from the UK to Japan and Korea to Australia and New Zealand (Buell 2005, p.5)."

Guattari (2000) warns that we are at the brink of ecocide because of the way we have challenged the

earth; while Williams (2011) contrasts the country and the city as it relates to English culture and civilization. William Howarth (1998) considers the displacement and deprivation of rural people by modernization as oppressive and a threat to the environment. Ziser (2011) draws attention to the increasing use of fossil fuel and the impending danger to the environment if environment friendly alternatives are not sought. Watts (2014) examines the devastating effects of oil exploration and exploitation; while McColley (2001) considers the issues in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and posits that they are still present in environmental discourse. Siddall (2009) looks at landscape and literature by analyzing extracts that cut across English literary tradition in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Hopkins, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley and others.

Tanure Ojaide in his foreword to Okuyade (2013) says that ecocriticism has to do with ecologically sensitive creative writing and criticism. He observes the health hazards from methane and other chemicals which contaminate the air, land and water. Gabriel Okara in “The Call of the River Nun” and J. P. Clark in “Night Rain,” among other such works, present the difficult Niger Delta land and seascape. A deeper level of ecological awareness emerged with Tanure Ojaide’s *Labyrinths of the Delta* and Niyi Osundare’s *The Eye of the Earth*(1986). Ojaide laments the destruction of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta; while Osundare bemoans the destruction of virgin forests from capitalist encroachment.

Inyang and Orhero (2020) investigate how Saro-Wiwa is employed as a motif in the subject matters of ecological devastation, political persecution, Niger Delta activism and minority politics. Abba and Onyemachi (2020) go beyond highlighting the endangered Niger Delta environment to focusing on eco-alienation which they refer to as the sense of separation between people and nature. Awhefeada (2021) examines the enterprise of a new wave of poets who have written in pidgin and locates them within the Niger Delta literary tradition.

3. Methodology

Data for this study are drawn from the eco-critical poems of Ebi Yeibo and G’ebinyo Ogbowei. Three poems are selected from the collections of each poet as indicated.

- Ebi Yeibo: *The Forbidden Tongue*
- “No Fireflies Here”
- “Rage of a River
- Ebi Yeibo: *Shadows of the Setting Sun*
- (c) “Oil War”

- G’ebinyo Ogbowei: *Song of a Dying River*
- “These Starving Streets”
- 4. G’ebinyo Ogbowei: *Marsh Boy and Other Poems*
- (b) “The Tyranny of Greed”
- (c) “Marsh Boy”

These poems have been selected based on their eco-critical scope and depth.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Grammar is used for data analysis. This grammar grew out of the works of Firth in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. Halliday captured the model in his article, “Categories of the Theory of Grammar.” It Started as Scale and Category Grammar. As the grammar developed, emphasis moved to meaning and the social functions of language. Lamidi (2000) outlines the reasons why this grammar is used:

Systemic grammar emphasises meaning and communication.

In systemic grammar, emphasis is on acceptability rather than grammaticality.

It is context based and emphasises the sociological aspects of language.

M.T. Lamidi observes that at the level of delicacy, the NMG has the MHQ structure. M is modifier; H is head; while Q is qualifier. Within the sentence, SPCA is the usual form where S is subject, P predicator, C complement, and A adjunct. Bloor and Bloor (1995) tell us that the Nominal Group could be a single word (Head Noun) as in “Electricity”; Modifier and Head as in “most homes”; and Modifier, Modifier Qualifier as in an underground cable. These are contained in the following sentence: Electricity is supplied to most homes through an underground cable.

Adejare and Adejare (1996) identify the possible patterns under the MHQ structure.

MHQ =	(M)	H	(Q)
	famous	Ojo	of Ibadan
HQ =	M	H	Q
	---	Ojo	of Ibadan
MH =	M	H	Q
	famous	Ojo	---
H =	---	M	H
	---	Ojo	---

The patterns show that M and Q are optional elements, while H is obligatory. It is the Nominal Group structure that will be use for data analysis. The relevant structures are italicized and analysed.

4. Data Analysis

The selected poems are analysed within the Nominal Group against the background of the theoretical approach. The data are discussed and interpreted from their ideological point of view.

Text 1(Ebi

Yeibo's Poems)

Text 1 Extract 1(No Fireflies Here)

Stanza 1

Fireflies fondle secret parts

H M H

Of the amorous night

Q

In a carnival of colours

M H Q

“Secret parts of the amorous night” shows the beauty, colour, calm and love that existed in the environment. “Carnival of colours” is a nominal group embedded in an adverbial, telling us about the luxuriance and splendour of the environment. The determiner ‘the’ and the adjective, ‘amorous’, modify the head noun, night. “Carnival” is premodified by the indefinite article “a” and postmodified by “of colours” in the MHQ structure.

Stanza 2

But without warning

Without a whiff of warning

M H Q

Our night is betrothed

To a carnival of cannibals

M H Q

The MHQ structure, ‘a whiff of warning’ shows suddenness. There is a fondness and attachment to the night, ‘our night’. The peace of a dear night suddenly disappears. There is a sad movement from ‘a carnival of colours’ to ‘a carnival of cannibals’ with the arrival of the international oil companies. The MHQ structure is retained here.

Stanza 3

Who come to you

Garlanded as a connoisseur

The nominal group, ‘a connoisseur’ shows deadly deception and false appearances. It has the MH structure. The reference is to the cannibals. They pretend to be innocuous but are actually deadly.

Stanza 4

O the mamba comes to you

M H

With open fangs

M Q

Claims it has shed its venom

The MH structure in ‘the mamba’ and ‘open fangs’ shows how deadly the situation is. The idea of deceit is continued here. The mamba tells a lie that it has shed its venom, but this is not true. The venom is still there and ready to destroy.

Stanza 5

This mamba comes to you

M H

With innocuous fangs

M H

This mamba’ and ‘innocuous fangs’ continue the pretext of harmlessness. The fangs are not innocuous, they are actually venomous.

Stanza 6

It slithers up the throne

In a ceremony of innocence

M H Q

Signalling the new moon.

M M Q

The nominal groups ‘the throne’ and ‘ceremony of innocence’, give the idea of the mamba now in control of affairs, pretending innocence. The mamba has used its wiles to get to the centre stage and call the shots.

Stanza 7

Then thunder strikes

H

Without warning, without

A whiff of warning

M H Q

Burying living souls

M H

In a mountain of murk

M H Q

The nominal groups, ‘thunder’ and “a mountain of murk” show the extent of damage and wreckage.

Stanza 8

The innocuous mamba

M M H

Has spit [sic] into our eyes

M H

“The innocuous mamba” continues the idea of pretext. The sarcastically harmless mamba has spat into their eyes. The use of ‘innocuous’ as a modifier

smacks of pretence. In spite of the posturing, the oil companies are as poisonous as the mamba.

Stanza 9

Fireflies wilfully fly away

H

'Fireflies' as a nominal group here shows the disappearing animal life resulting from the activities of the oil companies.

Ebi Yeibo's poem laments the destruction of animal life, using the firefly as a symbol

Text 1 Extract 2

(Rage of a River)

Stanza 1

Dwellers of the delta

H Q

Wax wild on the wings of wreckage.

M H Q

The HQ structure, 'Dwellers of the delta' as a nominal group locates the people, while 'wings of wreckage' gives an idea of the despoliation of the Delta.

Stanza 2

Who wouldn't *whose paradise*

M H

Becomes *a prostitute's rag*

M M H

The nominal groups 'whose paradise' and 'prostitute's rag' further the idea of despoliation and justifies why the people are wild with rage. The natural resource (endowment) of the Niger Delta, like the body of a prostitute is for all comers. The metaphor of prostitute's rag echoes the proverbial shrivelled and milked cow. The nominal group 'paradise' suggests a prostitute's beautiful body, which together with the rag suggests the rape and pillage of the Niger Delta.

Stanza 3

Whose brooks brim.

M H

With *bilious black blood*

M M H

The head noun 'blood' is pre-modified by "bilious and black". The anger of this deprived people flows and boils over like a raging river.

Stanza 4

Whose dreams host *rabid jiggers*?

M H M H

The nominal group 'rabid jiggers' conjures up the picture of a parasite that slowly eats the toes of man. The dreams of the people are eaten up.

Stanza 5

But who wouldn't *whose nerves*

M H

Are nailed to *anaemic nights*

M H

Even the night is anaemic. The people are lifeless as expressed in the MH nominal group, 'anaemic nights'.

Stanza 6

Whose *savoury swamps*

M H

Are *cauldrons of chemicals*

H Q

The modifier "savoury" is a reference to the saline sea. The HQ structure, "cauldrons of chemicals", depicts chemical waste products poured into the sea. It is double tragedy for the people as a naturally salty sea is polluted by chemical effluents.

Stanza 7

Whose patrician pockets

M M H

Hoist *harmattan's flag* M H

The nominal group in the structure expresses the idea of a people supposedly rich but paradoxically poor.

Stanza 8

Whose hallowed virginity

M M H

Is stolen *the wrong way*?

M M H

The nominal group reflects a virgin territory that is desecrated, raped and pillaged:

Stanza 9

O the slaughter of white eagles

M H Q

Leaves the *animal kingdom*

M M H

In sackcloth

H

The group, 'white eagles' shows something valuable, but unfortunately, it has been destroyed. This leads to poverty and regret.

Stanza 10

When *a hawk* swoops on chicks
M H

The mother goes wild.

The nominal groups here are symbolic. The nominal group, ‘a hawk’ denotes a predator, the ‘chick’ is the victim, ‘The mother’ is a protester. In the Niger Delta, the international oil companies are ‘hawks’, the people are ‘chicks’, while activists are ‘The mother’ of the chicks. The Niger-Delta struggle is thus justified.

Ebi Yeibo uses the Nominal Group to describe the rape and pillage of the Niger Delta.

Text 1 Extract 3 (Oil War)

Stanza 1

As a prologue to *the poaching*
M H

They hold us captive

On *these blackened phosphorus beaches:*
M M M H

The dog glued to the home
 Never gets pregnant.

The beaches where the people are held are dirty and polluted with chemicals. The modifiers of the head noun, “these”, ‘blackened’ and ‘phosphorus’ explain this.

Stanza 2

Above, as the *setting sun*
M M H

Peeps through the *translucent haze*

M M H
 With *befuddled eyes*
M H

They float on *an infinite pageantry*
M M H

Of *swollen colours, distended bellies*
Q M H

Even in *the chemical-clogged creeks,*
M M H

Careened, like River Forcados in high tide.

The oil company staff in contrast with the indigenes engage in an ‘infinite pageantry’. They celebrate and enjoy themselves. In spite of the polluted rivers and environment, they have developed pot bellies. The modifiers are ‘infinite’, ‘distended’ and ‘chemical-clogged’. They show that while the indigenes are underfed, the workers are overfed and their environment (the indigenes’) is polluted.

Stanza 3

While we, *drifting clay*
M H

In a tattered waist-cloth fit for *a hag*
M M H

Scramble for *a splintered sunlight*
M M H

Floating languidly on *the rusty river,*
M M H

Like *meaningless rubble.*
M H

This stanza uses nominal groups like ‘drifting clay’, ‘tattered waist cloth’ ‘splintered sunlight’, ‘rusty river’ to capture the squalid condition of the indigenes of the oil producing areas.

Stanza 4

O only *cast-iron libertines*
M H

Carous[sic] with damsels
 In *a cursed cavern*

M M H
 Or *blackened beach*

M H
 Repositories of *poisonous products*
M H

Of *rusty pristine pipes and septic storms*
M M H M H

Roaming through *the womb of the creeks*
M H Q

Sanctioned by *some bloodless god.*
M M H

The company staff being die-hard “libertines” engage in revelry and sexual pleasures with ladies in spite of the murky environment. This is expressed in nominal groups like ‘cast-iron libertines’, ‘cursed cavern’, and ‘blackened beach’.

In this poem, Ebi Yeibo contrasts the lifestyles of the oil company executives with those of the indigenes of oil producing communities.

Text 2 (G’ebinyo Ogbowei’s Poems)

Text 2 Extract 1 (These Starving Streets)

Stanza 1

walking, down *these starving streets*
M M H

you hear the rumble of *angry stomachs*
M H

too proud to beg for bread

The nominal groups here depict the degree of poverty in the land. The people are hungry in the midst of abundance. Even the streets are hungry as reflected in the MMH structure. The intensity of hunger is reflected in the modifier, 'starving'. The MH structure in "angry stomachs", describes the anger of the people, reminding one of the saying that "A hungry man is an angry man."

Stanza II

walking down *these starving streets*

M M H

you hear *the harrowing howls of harried hearts.*

M M H Q

There is the repetition of the nominal group, "these starving streets". We have an MMHQ nominal group structure, continuing the expression of the people's anger.

Stanza III

walking down *these starving streets*

M M H

you/hear *the unsettling screams of street urchins*

M M H Q

abandoned *their headless bodies*

M M H

feast for flies and *scavenging dogs*

M H

extol police patrols prowling city streets

M H M H

keep prowlers from shrine and body parts markets.

The nominal group, "the unsettling screams of street urchins" captures poor, hungry and homeless youths of the Niger Delta. The use of "their headless bodies" and "police patrols" is suggestive of how the Nominal Group is used to reflect the oppressive hands of law enforcement agents.

Stanza IV

walking down *these starving streets*

M M H

you feel *the smouldering of the slum mum*

M H Q

her shoeless shirtless lad denied

M M M H

are clubbed out of the coalition

are mowed down by *a belching machine.....*

M M H

In this stanza, the issues intensify. The nominal group "the smouldering of the slum mum" reminds us of the women of the Niger Delta and how they suffer by the fireside, using firewood to cook and smoke fishes. Her children are "shoeless" and "shirtless" as

expressed in the nominal group. In spite of their already poor and neglected situation, they are brought down by the guns of security agents.

Text 2 Extract 2 (The Tyranny of Greed)

Stanza I

This is *the tyranny of greed*

M M Q

This seductive violence

M M H

That snares *your scoffing soul*

M M H

that takes captive *your mooning mania*

M M H

takes it on *a tour of killing fields*

M H Q

deep in the *despoiled delta*

M M H

The nominal groups here give a picture of the killings and degradation of the Niger Delta. The title "Tyranny of Greed" describes how the Nigerian state is motivated by greed to keep a tyrannical hold on the Niger Delta as a way of ensuring unimpeded access to oil. The nominal group "seductive violence" hints at the wily ways of government. The tactic is to apply violence in a subtle manner by using the carrot and stick approach. The consequence is that the area is turned into a "killing field" and devastated.

Stanza II

this is *the tyranny of greed*

M H Q

this smash-and-grab relationship

M M H

that does nothing but grab and hide

that strips us of dignity and humanity

Here, "smash and grab" in the MMH structure describes the kind of relationship that exists between government and the people. Government is actually looking for territories to conquer and exploit. As a conquered people, they lose their "dignity and humanity". The nominal groups show that they are actually vassals in their own country.

Stanza III

This is *the tyranny of greed*

M H Q

like a starving pride

M M H

drags down *a compassionate seductress*

M M H

a block buster rape on pleading knees?

M M H

The italicized nominal groups look at the issue from another perspective. Like a woman, the Niger Delta is raped and pillaged.

Text 2 Extract 3 (Marsh Boy)

Locked in *the prison of poverty*
 M H Q
 Denied the right to rise
 out of holes in *sighing swamps*
 M H
 I sing of creeks with *crushed dreams*
 H Q
 I sing of rivers with *decaying hope*
 H Q
 I sing of rivers *the cargo ships and*
 H M M H
supertankers sail on
 H
I sing of swamps sold to swindlers and
 H H
rustlers
 H
I sing of swamps demanding dignity
 H
and opportunity...
 Q
 spurned, passed over
 I cast aside paddle and net
humble hungry hunter....
 M M H

The title “Marsh Boy” as a nominal group hints at the environment that is to be talked about: people that live in a wetland. The image of poverty continues as they are imprisoned by poverty. The nominal group, “holes in sighing swamps” tells how sad the people are. Creeks is postmodified by crushed dreams; while ponds is postmodified by decaying hope. The people are swindled and dehumanized. They, therefore, cry for dignity as reflected in the nominal groups, “swamps demanding dignity and opportunity”.

5. Conclusion

Ebi Yeibo uses the pre- and post-modifications of the Head Noun to reflect the situation in the Niger Delta. In “ No Fireflies Here,”The Head Noun and its modifiers and qualifiers give us an impression of the gaiety, beauty and mirth that characterized the pre-oil era. Then Noun Head “mamba” was introduced and there was thus a movement from “a carnival of colours” to a “carnival of cannibals.” The “mamba” further shows the wiles of the international oil companies and the Nigerian government. This marks a transition from the beautiful and peaceful pre-oil to the squalid and troubled post-oil era.

For Ogbowei, even the streets starve, producing “unsettling screams of street urchins.”The Head Noun “streets” is modified by “these starving”; while “screams” is modified by “the unsettling.” The different derivatives of the MHQ structure show “the tyranny of greed” and “the prison of poverty.”

The MHQ structure has been used to reveal the nominal group features that capture the ideas of the Niger Delta people. The ideas revealed here are those of environmental degradation, poverty, indignity and dehumanization, among others. All these are geared towards the struggle for resource control.

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