

ONTOLOGICAL METAPHORS AS COGNITIVE TOOLS FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL PROTEST IN EBI YEIBO'S POETRY

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Abstract

This study examines the cognitive structures that underpin Yeibo's metaphorical use of language and how these structures promote comprehension of abstract concepts in his poetry. The analysis is primarily descriptive and interpretative. We identified eight ontological metaphors across Yeibo's poems and analysed them using George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). CMT gave us cognitive access to Yeibo's thinking—a way into the mental architecture underlying his poetic choices. Our analysis shows how Yeibo's conceptual metaphors clarify what might otherwise remain opaque—they make abstract political realities cognitively accessible. Yeibo deploys natural forces and abstract concepts as active agents, turning them into vehicles to protest the social and political realities of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. His metaphorical mappings also reveal sensitivity to political leaders' erratic, destructive behaviour in the Niger Delta. Yeibo harnesses natural forces and abstract concepts through ontological metaphors to expose socio-political oppression in the Niger Delta—his metaphors do political work.

Key Words: Metaphor, Poetry, Cognitive Stylistics, Ontological Metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor

Introduction

Yeibo, a distinguished poet, is known for his remindful collections, including *Shadows of the Setting Sun*, *The Forbidden Tongue*, *The Fourth Masquerade* and *A Song for Tomorrow*. The collections carry profound social, political, and historical resonance. The Niger Delta region, corrupted, exploited, unjust, provides Yeibo's backdrop. His ontological metaphors are cognitive tools for understanding this complexity, mapping experiences from multiple domains onto the region's political crisis. Cognitively and stylistically, Yeibo's ontological metaphors both echo the predicaments of the Niger Delta region while condemning the political leaders responsible for the hardship, sickness, poverty, and hunger that is prevalent among the people of the region. Earlier scholars have interpreted Yeibo's metaphors valuably, but ontological structures are specifically under-examined. This is our focus. We investigate how Yeibo's ontological metaphors help readers grasp abstract socio-political concepts—and how they sharpen the critique embedded in his verse.

Review of Scholarship Related to Critical Studies of Ebi Yeibo's Poetry

Yeibo's poetry has drawn considerable critical attention, with scholars examining socio-political themes at local, national, and international scales. Stephen Kekeghe views Yeibo as a healer-poet alongside Tanure Ojaide. Though neither is a medical professional, their poetry uses comforting language to mend troubled minds, uplift the despairing and soothes the traumatised (390). Also, Kekeghe regards Yeibo's words as medicine for Nigeria's oppressed, particularly the Niger Delta people, packaging courage, optimism, justice, and hope for a better future. Kekeghe's study, however, does not address specific socio-political issues in the region or examined the metaphorical thinking structuring Yeibo's poems.

Contrary to Kekeghe's views, other scholars highlight Yeibo's focus on environmental devastation and the despair caused by gender and political assaults on minority communities in the Niger Delta (Iyabode 101; Abonyi 47; Udisi 19). These scholars emphasize Yeibo's collective (not personal) struggle, showing him grappling with relentless oppressors who inflict pain on both people and environment. Yeibo also emerges from Africa's post-independence economic struggles, confronting history to reshape governance (Okuyade 1; Ibitoye-Ayeni 66–69). These critics note how Yeibo intertwines poetics, history, and Nigerian politics—defending nationhood while exposing governmental insensitivity before, as he sees it, irreversible ruin sets in. Garba (23), Okpapi (97), and Egaya (6-7)

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separately argue that the Niger Delta environment shapes both Yeibo's ideology and poetic form with the region functioning as setting and inspiration simultaneously. Their studies emphasize the environment, but we would argue Yeibo's ideology stems more directly from abject poverty, state neglect, and inequitable resource distribution—the material conditions afflicting his people. In line with this, Garba describes Yeibo as a romantic poet in an unconventional sense, citing “I Can't Leave Her”, a love poem to Delta State University, Abraka as reflecting the broader Niger Delta microcosm (25). This review shows that existing studies have productively explored patriotism, style, environment, healing, and socio-political issues in Yeibo's poetry. However, none has given sustained attention to the role of conceptual metaphor.

Cognitive Stylistics

Cognitive stylistics seeks to systematise understanding of the reading process. It hypothesises about mental activities during reading and how these shape interpretation. Cognitive stylistics assumes reading is an active process in which readers co-construct textual meaning (Jeffries and McIntyre 126). Stockwell states that “cognitive stylistics is all about reading literature” (1). The approach shifts focus from text composition to the connection between the human mind and reading. Margaret Freeman describes cognitive poetics as dual-natured, encompassing both textual aesthetics and embodied cognition, contributing to theories of art and mind (314). Steven Mithen's words lend credence to Freeman's words that modern artistic cognition emerged when mental conception, intentional communication and meaning attribution began to integrate (162). Cognitive stylistics emphasises readers' active role in meaning-making, where meaning appears from interaction between textual structures and mental processes. In Yeibo's poems such as “Tsunami,” “Sighs” and “Subsidy Scandal,” this mental component shapes both poetic articulation of Niger Delta plight and readers' responses to socio-political concerns.

Theoretical Background

This research adopts George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), selected for its capacity to illuminate cognitive patterns in Yeibo's poetry. Metaphor traces back to Aristotle who saw it as a secondary form of language that achieves clarity through improbable blends unobtainable with ordinary words (qtd. in Sean 3). He maintains that mastery of metaphor requires intuitive perception of similarities and that its primary function is conceptual clarification (qtd. in Semino 198). Later scholars like Black, Searle, and Levinson treated metaphor as comparison based on resemblance, often viewing it as linguistic deviation (qtd. in Semino 199). CMT's cognitive perspective has displaced the older rhetorical tradition in metaphor studies.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is all about “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (5). Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors are cognitively motivated, governing how we think and function daily (124). As they put it, our conceptual system is “fundamentally metaphorical (125), which means metaphor is not optional for thought, imagination, or reasoning—it is essential. CMT centres on mapping between source and target domains—concrete, experientially grounded sources structure abstract targets. Examples include ARGUMENT IS WAR, where criticism is mapped onto attack and losing an argument onto being shot down (4). Fairclough extends this, noting that these mappings shape not just language but action and practice too (195).

Ontological metaphors, one class of conceptual metaphors, treat abstract experiences as entities, substance, or containers. Personification, a key type of ontological metaphor, appears frequently in everyday talk and poetry alike (Csabi 215). CMT has limitations, particularly in accounting for emergent meanings. Still, it provides stable, coherent organisation of experience through mappings and domains (Evans and Green 437). CMT is therefore well-suited for examining how Yeibo's metaphors clarify Niger Delta socio-political and historical realities. As Lakoff and Turner note, poets can extend or defamiliarize conventional metaphors to offer new modes of thought (51).

Ontological Metaphor

Ontological metaphors let us grasp abstract concepts by treating them as objects and substances. For instance, POWER IS AN OBJECT. Csabi remarks in his works that ontological metaphors assign the place of an object/substance/container to abstract targets, without defining the precise nature of these (215). He further notes that personification is a type of ontological metaphor found in both poetic and informal conversation (215). From the above opinion, humans sometimes perceive activities, emotions and events as substances or entities. Relatively, Gibbs remarks that ontological correspondences hold between elements of one domain and elements of the other

domain. For example, the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER has the set of correspondences...

Source: HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER		Target: ANGER
Containers	→	body
Heated fluid	→	anger
Heat scale	→	anger scale
Pressure in container	→	experienced pressure
Agitation of bodily fluid	→	experienced agitation
Limits of container's resistance	→	limits in one's ability to suppress anger
Explosion	→	loss of control

(26)

Connecting Cognitive Concepts and Ontological Metaphors in Yeibo’s Poetry

Ontological metaphors constitute the primary linguistic surface through which deeper cognitive concepts—systematic cross-domain mappings rooted in embodied human experience—operate in Yeibo’s poetry. As Lakoff and Johnson emphasise, our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical, allowing us to structure abstract or intangible experiences (target domains) by recruiting concrete, experientially grounded domains (source domains). Ontological metaphors give boundless experiences entity or container status, which let us reference quantity, and critique them (Lakoff and Johnson 25-26; Csabi 215).

Yeibo realizes this cognitive mechanism primarily through personification. He gives natural forces, resources, and abstract states human bodies, agency, intentions, and actions. Readers consciously activate familiar source domains, like physical duels, predation, and containment to interpret political oppression, corruption, false hope, and environmental devastation. This mapping is ontological because it treats socio-political abstractions as tangible entities with physical impact, which clarifies complex realities and transforms passive suffering into a cognitively accessible site of protest. Across the eight poems we analysed, a consistent pattern emerges. Natural forces and abstract concepts are systematically personified to expose the agency of oppressors and the embodied suffering of the oppressed. This not only enhances comprehension but also ideologically critiques the erratic behaviour of Niger Delta political leaders by contrasting the destructive power of natural elements with human moral failure.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative cognitive stylistic approach to analyse ontological metaphors in Ebi Yeibo’s poetry. We drew our data from three collections, namely *Shadows of the Setting Sun*, *The Forbidden Tongue* and *The Fourth Masquerade*. We chose eight poems because they use metaphor prominently to address socio-political issues of the Niger Delta. We identified metaphors through close reading, then analysed their cognitive patterns, domain mappings, and word choices in Nigeria’s socio-political context. Conceptual mappings appear in small capital, following standard practice in cognitive linguistics. Our table displays patterns of how Yeibo’s metaphors reflect and critique the Niger Delta situation.

Discussion

Here we analyse how Yeibo uses metaphor. We extract metaphors from poems (hereafter TEXTS) and interpret them against Nigeria’s socio-political context, focusing on the Niger Delta.

Text 1

Misty clouds and the moon
 In a desperate duel in the sky
 The misty clouds easily winning;
 The moon, with a broken back
 And bruised face, rues her fate
 In tears for mankind

(“Subsidy scandal” *Shadows of the Setting Sun* 45)

The dominant conceptual metaphor is NATURAL ELEMENTS ARE HUMAN BODIES—an ontological personification. The moon and cloud contend here as natural forces. The clouds win because of where they sit in the sky, above the moon. The defeated moon weeps for humanity, expressing its bitterness and agony.

Text 2

Saddled with croaky serenades
From sepulchral saints
Our morning air is still laden
With dust and dirt
(“Dawn song” *The Forbidden Tongue* 22)

The underlying metaphor here is NATURAL ELEMENTS ARE CONTAINERS. Morning air typically functions as a soothing, cool container that replenishes us as we start the day. In the Niger Delta, however, the opposite holds. Morning air comes laden with deadly dust and dirt from oil exploration. Readers grasp that “dust” and “dirt” stand for the negative and poverty afflicting the region. This also reveals the toxic living conditions for Niger Delta people.

Text 3

Here a full tide of oil
Breeds milky monsters at the top
Who taunt the treasury
Spitting sore slums and scraps
(“No festivals here” *The Fourth Masquerade* 48)

NATURAL RESOURCES ARE PERSONS generates several interpretations here. First, the oil breeds monstrous leaders masquerading as saviours. Oil wealth makes them “milky monsters,” creatures who both exploit the people and brutally silence dissent. Second, the monsters represent politicians in power. They secretly sap national resources, steal and redistribute wealth, and reduce their own homelands to wastelands. Third, the politicians in Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta politicians, are extremely selfish, cunning and greedy bunch of persons; they are only interested in embezzling public funds and enriching themselves; and the lexical items “slum” and “scraps” reveal that the Niger Delta people live in an environment marked for neglect, hopelessness and poverty for which there can be no festivals there.

Text 4

I lie waiting at the crossroads
For the return of those renegades
Who counsel compromise
When conniving crows swoop
On our hapless sacrifice
Remorseless like hawks on chicks
(“Sacrifice” *The Forbidden Tongue*, 20)

Through COMPROMISE IS AN OBJECT, Yeibo shows how regional renegades commodify compromise in negotiations with the government. They push compromise on everyone in the Niger Delta, no matter the regional cost.

This also indicts the region’s small-time politicians who intentionally loot its natural resources.

Text 5

O what mocking moonbeams
Combing night’s hair, lustfully
Birthing a tainted twilight
(“Drowsy dreams” *The Forbidden Tongue*, 24)

Here the metaphor is NATURAL FORCES ARE HUMAN BODIES. The poem personifies moonbeams, night’s hair, and twilight. Through these forces, Yeibo seems to critique the Niger Delta’s upper classes, those who live comfortably while the masses suffer. Political leaders cynically dangle hope before the people, creating cover for their real aim: looting and dividing the nation’s wealth and resources. The poet is not comfortable with the perceived change of things, hence, he protests against the “mocking moonbeams combing night’s hair lustfully”.

Text 6

Here, dawn bristles
With hollow helmets of hope
Cornering us to closed contours
Crashing us on stoneless soils
(“Silent sorrow” *The Forbidden Tongue*, 31)

Text 6 consists of the underlying metaphor of DAWN BRISTLES ARE HUMANS. Dawn bristles are just like heartless and callous successive leaders who continually deceive the Niger Delta people with the message of hope. The political leaders raise their hope by making myriads of promises which they will never fulfil. The poet’s protest is against the deceitful and exploitative political leaders in the Niger Delta region.

Text 7

Tsunami reminds us
We stand in the middle of a maelstrom
Weaving unpredictable waters
To eke out a world –
(“Tsunami reminds us...” *The Forbidden Tongue*, 37)

Text 7 has the conceptual metaphor of NATURAL FORCES ARE PERSONS. Here, we have humanized Tsunami which “reminds” the cruel political leaders of its destructive nature through the lexical “maelstrom” and “unpredictable waters”. It sends signals of chaos, protest, destruction, and calamity. This means that the Niger Delta people will suddenly rise one day to oppose and chase the political leaders who steal and mismanage their natural resources as well as the democratic process. The Niger Delta people’s action will not be friendly at all but a deadly or destructive one which will strain the peace of the entire country.

Text 8

And naked posterity waits,
Waits to pluck petals of pain
Tall to the sky.
(“Sighs” *The Forbidden Tongue*, 51)

Text 8 holds the underlying metaphor of POSTERITY IS A PERSON and it is just like a person who patiently expects or hopes for something remarkable to happen. Despite the abject poverty pervasive in the Niger Delta region, the people wait with great expectations for better living. They wait in vain and only to be left in devastation and agony by the awkward and suffocating activities of the political leaders.

Table 1: Cognitive Concepts, Ontological Realisations, and Socio-Political Critique in Yeibo’s Metaphors

Cognitive Concept (Conceptual Metaphor)	Ontological Realisation (Specific Personification)	Source → Target Mapping	Key Lexical Items	Socio-Political Critique Enabled	Text
NATURAL ELEMENTS ARE HUMAN BODIES	Clouds and moon in a “desperate duel”; moon with “broken back” and “bruised face” that “rues her fate / In tears”	Natural forces → Political leaders vs. protesters/activists	misty clouds, broken back, bruised face, rues fate, tears	Oppressive leaders violently suppress dissent; fragile protesters mourn mankind’s suffering	1
				.	2

NATURAL ELEMENTS ARE CONTAINERS	Morning air “laden / With dust and dirt” despite “croaky serenades”	Environment → Container of pollution and neglect	croaky, dust, dirt	Oil exploration renders the Niger Delta environment toxic and unhealthy	
NATURAL RESOURCES ARE PERSONS	Oil “breeds milky monsters” that “taunt the treasury” and spit “sore slums and scraps”	Crude oil wealth → Corrupt political elites	full tide, milky monsters, taunt, spitting, sore slums, scraps	Oil wealth generates selfish, exploitative leaders who enrich themselves while creating poverty and wasteland .	3
COMPROMISE IS AN OBJECT / POLITICAL BETRAYAL IS PREDATION	“Renegades” counsel compromise while “conniving crows swoop / On our hapless sacrifice / Remorseless like hawks on chicks”	Crows/hawks → Collaborators and tyrants; sacrifice/chicks → People’s resources and vulnerable masses	renegades, conniving crows, swoop, remorseless, hawks, chicks	Local collaborators and predators plunder communal resources without remorse	4
NATURAL FORCES ARE HUMAN BODIES	“Mocking moonbeams / Combing night’s hair, lustfully / Birthing a tainted twilight”	Moonbeams/night → Deceptive political promises	mocking, lustfully, birthing, tainted	Leaders pretend to offer hope only to deliver devastation and false change	5
DAWN / HOPE IS A DECEPTIVE HUMAN AGENT	“Dawn bristles / With hollow helmets of hope / Cornering us to closed contours”	Dawn → Heartless successive leaders	bristles, hollow helmets, cornering, closed contours	Politicians repeatedly raise false hopes, trapping people in hopelessness	6.

NATURAL FORCES ARE PERSONS	Tsunami “reminds us / We stand in the middle of a maelstrom / Weaving unpredictable waters”	Tsunami/maelstrom → Impending popular revolt	reminds, maelstrom, unpredictable waters, weaving	Oppressed people may rise destructively against exploitative leaders	7.
POSTERITY / FUTURE IS A PERSON	“Naked posterity waits, / Waits to pluck petals of pain / Tall to the sky”	Future generations → Patient but suffering entity	naked, waits, pluck petals of pain	Despite poverty, people wait in vain for improvement; only pain awaits the next generation	8.

The table reveals a consistent pattern: Yeibo maps concrete natural experiences onto abstract political targets, making critique cognitively accessible through personification. Through natural forces and abstract concepts, Yeibo depicts the Niger Delta’s socio-political crises and its oppressive leaders. These metaphors connect nature to human suffering, revealing Yeibo’s deep investment in his people’s liberation. Through domain mapping, conceptual metaphors both create meaning and reshape how we see reality.

Findings

The findings are as follows:

- i. Yeibo’s use of conceptual metaphors helps readers grasp underlying meanings by disambiguating messages. This is achieved cognitively through ontological personification, reifying abstract oppression as tangible entities with agency, allowing readers to activate embodied source domains and apprehend ideological critiques.
- ii. Yeibo’s deployment of natural forces and abstract concepts as agents of change expresses protest against those responsible for Niger Delta predicaments while revealing his aspiration to salvage his homeland. By granting natural forces ontological status as agents, Yeibo positions nature as a potential revolutionary force against human oppressors.
- iii. The poet’s source and target domain mappings highlight Nigerians’ sensitivity to the daft nature of Niger Delta political gladiators.
- iv. We didn’t expect Yeibo to rely so heavily on ontological metaphors for depicting repression and suppression in the Niger Delta—yet this turns out to be his dominant stylistic choice.

Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates that Yeibo uses ontological metaphors as cognitive tools, mapping concrete experiences—especially natural forces—onto the Niger Delta’s socio-political realities: oppression, corruption, environmental devastation. This is not merely decorative. These metaphors do cognitive work. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, we see how Yeibo’s frequent personification gives abstract concepts human bodies, intentions, even destructive power. This makes complex political messages graspable—readers can mentally engage with the region’s crisis through these embodied figures rather than wrestling with pure abstraction. Yeibo’s natural elements act as both destroyers and potential rebels. This dual role critiques political leaders’ erratic, exploitative behaviour while also voicing protest grounded in his people’s physical suffering. The metaphors are not abstract—they are bodily, visceral. Previous scholarship on Yeibo has overlooked the metaphorical structures underlying his ideological work. Our cognitive stylistic approach addresses this gap—and reveals patterns earlier critics missed.

Yeibo's ontological metaphors are not random. They form systematic patterns that transform the Niger Delta's abstract predicaments into vivid, embodied experiences. These metaphors two purposes: poetic and activist. Yeibo's poetry exemplifies what activist literature can do. His ontological metaphors turn passive reading into mental resistance. Poetry, in Yeibo's hands, does not just describe reality—it reshapes how we conceptualize it, potentially inspiring action. Future work might compare Yeibo's metaphorical patterns with other Niger Delta poets—does this cognitive approach characterize regional poetry more broadly? We are also curious whether Yeibo's metaphor use evolves in his later collections, which we have not examined here. These questions could deepen our understanding of how cognition, language, and political activism intersect in this literary tradition.

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