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Eco-engagement and Existentialist Angst in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide

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Abstract:

Tanure Ojaide directs his poetic energies towards fighting environmental degradation and human rights abuses in the Niger Delta, Nigeria and the world in general. He mirrors these injustices and frowns at successive Nigerian governments and their cohorts who degrade the Niger Delta and exploit the indigenous people. His poetry reflects the Niger Delta environment of his youth which has lost its lush vegetation due to the activities of multinational oil companies in the area with the continuous connivance of Nigerian governments. Consequently, he condemns the Nigerian governments and multinational oil industries that ravage the land as a result of the destruction caused by the oil exploration carried out in the area. To actualise his vision of achieving ecological balance in the area, the poet is intense, confrontational, protest oriented and works towards ameliorating the plight of the exploited and condemns the Nigerian political system in order to save the environment from further destruction. He speaks for the voiceless in the society and focuses on the problems that affect them as a reflection of what affects humanity generally. I intend to examine these issues by applying eco-criticism on Ojaide's four eco-poetry collections. The argument in this discourse is that the environment as deployed by Ojaide is not simply for aesthetics, but rather it is a tool of political activism directed at condemning the pangs of existential angst, corporate greed and in restoring ecological balance for the emancipation of the oppressed.

Keywords: *Tanure Ojaide, Niger Delta, eco-egagement, existentialism, ecocriticism*

1. Introduction

Tanure Ojaide was born and bred in Okpara Inland in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State of Nigeria. His Urhobo culture, experiences and uniqueness, such as his recourse to orature and passionate allusion to the Niger Delta people and region, condition his poetic activism. To engage these fundamental issues in his poetry, Ojaide deploys suitable symbols and images to interrogate environmental degradation, marginalisation and the deplorable human condition in the Niger Delta. This strategy captures images of lack luster, waste, destruction and death; which reflects the fauna and the flora of the Niger Delta environment in order to condemn the negative effects of bad leadership, oil exploration and modern technology on marginalised. Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta manifest through oil blowouts, spillage, gas flares and industrial wastes which negatively affect the people's health, economy, land and psyche. The injustices that take place in the Niger Delta which threaten the corporate existence of the indigenous people of the area, are recurrent subjects in Ojaide's poetry. The reality of the plunder that goes on the area are incidences of man's inhumanity to man which pushes the poet to lament on the paradox that takes place in the oil rich Niger Delta environment which is naturally endowed; but regrettably suffers from untold hardship and abandonment. Ojaide's passionate attachment to his root often influences his worldview and attitude to life. This distinctive advantage of using his birthplace in his poetry compels him to fight for the freedom of his people and speak for them on the socio-political corruption that constantly takes place in the area. Ojaide himself acknowledges that he fulfils the roles of both prophet and town crier of his people in the following words:

My roots thus run deep into the delta area. Its traditions, folklore, fauna, and flora...My Delta years have become the touchstone with which I measure the rest of my life. The streams, the fauna and the flora are the symbols I continually tap. Even when I wander outside to the many places, I have experienced that land of streams, the Iroko tree, antelopes, anthills, and so much life remains indelible in my memory... Home remains for me the Delta, where I continue to anchor Myself (22).

Thus even when he is physically detached from his birthplace, he seems to connect to it both spiritually and psychologically, and so the environment serves as a constant symbol of inspiration to him. This cultural affinity seems to function for him as an embodiment of mystical, mental and psychological source of inspiration. He appropriates the Niger Delta environment in his eco-crusade as a microcosm of reaching out to other communities that suffer the same fate.

2. Conceptualization of Eco-Criticism and Tanure Ojaide's Ecological Engagement

There is a force that propels the contemporary African writer to be relevant in his society in order to deal with the problems confronting the people and society. Wole Soyinka reinforces this assertion when he contends that the African writer functions as the voice that sustains moral standard of the society (20). Consequently, contemporary African literature which is produced and shaped by socio-political and economic realities which the work captures, is a repository and an instrument which helps the people to understand their cultural value.

There is a paradigm shift in the African imaginative discourse which affords eco-writers a new dimension of deploying the environment to educate the people on the environment considering the relationship between humanity and their environment. Issues of nature or land in Africa have always been an important factor in the African society. It determines human existence and conditions the choice of habitation, culture or even one's occupation due to the nature of human needs and their response to the environment. The environment is also synonymous with the source of life, sustenance and family heirloom. As a result, when one is forcefully dislodged from his/her environment by way of dispossession of land or its resources, it is perceived that the person's life and means of livelihood have been cut off. This situation invariably creates existential crisis because land and its resources in Africa have physical, spiritual, political, social and economic implications. Land issues have caused many untold ethnic conflicts in Africa. The Mau Mau war which was fought for example in East Africa was as result of environmental tension and the struggle for the ownership of land. Ngugi wa Thiong'o sums up the importance of land thus:

if a man had plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off (22).

This captures the significance of land in Africa which its literature incorporates. The environment therefore serves as a literary force for mobilizing change in the post-colonial African society.

Against the backdrop of eco-critical discourse, this paper argues that there is anexus between literature and the environment. Ojaide's ecological engagement demonstrates that the poet utilises the environment as an effective tool of poetic activism. Eco-analysts such as Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm 1996, Kerridge and Sammells 1998, Lawrence Buell 2004, and Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer 2006, attest to the value of eco-criticism and environmental literature. Advocates of this intellectual reconnaissance capture the importance of the environment and condemn injustices and human rights abuses which continue to stifle human existence and sustainable development. In the same manner Ogaga Okuyade notes that human beings are at the verge of ecological and biological catastrophes and calls for urgent solution to the problem of the environment especially as a result of post-colonial development and globalization (10). Eco-scholars(William Slaymaker, 2007, Byron Caminero-Santangelo, 2007) have also drawn critical attention to the importance of nurturing a balance between the needs of humanity and their environment and condemn the degradation that is currently ravaging the human environment.

The type of eco-activism which Ojaide engages revolves around political action. He encapsulates environmental issues in an overt committed manner in order to tackle cases of human rights abuse and environmental degradation; and also to sensitize the public to imbibe a more positive approach in handing the earth which people depend on as a dwelling place and for subsistence. This kind of situation applies to the Niger Delta of Nigeria and the circumstances that led to the trial, detention and execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, an environmental writer and leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People, a minority group that champions the fight against injustice in the area. Eco-criticism captures issues of equity, fairness and justice against the backdrop of danger and death suffered by organisms, such as humans, animals, plants and water in the area. This is because if the virtues of human rights and democracy are not entrenched in the society, peace and unity will not prevail. This is witnessed in the Niger Delta where resistant movements persist because the people are aggrieved that they are marginalized and deprived of their land and so they demand for the control of their natural resources.

The environment as conceived in this paper is a system, situation or condition which is total and all embracing. It has to do with the cohabitation of living and non-living things which include man, animal and plants that live in a particular area. The term has to do with features that exist and relate with one another in a given area which shapes life and intersects with people's activities. The environment also involves the interaction of the flora and fauna that connect with the social, economic, political and cultural factors in an area especially when such elements or features are considered threatened or struggling to survive from threat, harsh weather or marginalisation in a haunting society. The features of the environment that apply in this paper, such as humans, animals, plants, soils, waters and air are considered as endangered or exposed to harmful human circumstances that make them liable to extinction. Daniel Omoweh defines the environment as the sum total of ecological resources of a people (13-18).

Critics appraise Ojaide's poetry as a consistent barometer that interrogates the destruction of Niger Delta environment as a result of oil exploration carried out by multinational oil corporations in collaboration with the Federal Government of Nigeria. These unwholesome human activities, as a great number of literary scholars (Alu, N.A and Suwa, V.Y. 2012, Olafioye, T. 2000) have observed, lead to human rights abuses and the commoditisation of the environment

3. Ecological Engagement and Existential Angst in Tanure Ojaide's Poetry

Ojaide's four poetry collections will be examined in line with the environmental problems and issues as influenced by the contemporary reality which the works reflect. The collections are *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *The Blood of Peace* (1991), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1997) and *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007). His eco-engagement is linked with the existential angst of human condition because of the threatening forces of nature and socio-political and economic

predicaments of postcolonialism, couple with the negative forces of globalisation which the people suffer. These engagements focus on the exploitation and the marginalization of the people in the Niger Delta through a poetic strategy that calls for political, social and economic justice. The Niger Delta as a trope offers him a creative resource and a tool to agitate for justice which is a cardinal human right for every individual.

Post-colonial disillusionment and some negative forces of globalization that ravage African countries and the people of the Niger Delta motivates Ojaide, a self-acclaimed voice of the Niger Delta to codify his poetry into multiple fitting connotations in order to pass his message. Ojaide himself in his *Ordering the African Imagination* attests to his imbibing of the Niger Delta and 'its spirits' which evoke in him ideas and vision through which his writing is shaped (36-37).

The circumstances that surrounding *Labyrinths of the Delta* centres on the environment, culture and politics. The poem 'The Sentence' brazenly captures the essence of home, exile, alienation and human rights abuses. In this poem Ojaide's directs his eco-engagement against destructive forces because the indigenes perceive themselves as displaced. This is to say that the dialectic of the whole situation is that even though physically the people live on their own land, but psychologically they see themselves as being on exile. He says:

I do not know when I will complete my prison sentence
I am deliberately kept in the dark about its tem
I have been moved from cell to cell, from prison house
to prison house, from town to town
I am beyond pardon and there will be no parole for me

...

Am not satisfied with myself-it is so lonely around (9).

His *Labyrinths of the Delta* contributes significantly to African literature that deals with the theme of exile and homelessness in the context of marginalization of a people. These feature as themes in Ojaide's poetry and are vivid representations of man's inhumanity to man. This ambivalence of uncertainty or contradiction echoes copiously in Ojaide's poetry which manifests in a double realization of loss of identity and that of home place. This mental state of the feeling of loss and homelessness include the appropriation of land which embodies the loss of valuables, culture and wealth.

This collection presents the persona as a dissent voice that 'derides the oppressors' (Okome11) and laments that the rich pristine environment of his youth is currently a wasteland because of the looting that goes on in the area. This causes the poet anguish and pain. Beyond this, he projects his people's anxiety and political will in order to fight for their freedom and heritage. The context of the dirge in Ojaide's *Labyrinths...* operates on two levels. First, it brings to bear the persona's agony because of the destruction visited on the land captured symbolically by utilising history, mythology and legendary heroes to comment and depict scenes and historic events

We took off without thought of where we were going,
And paths opened for our anxious feet
It was not for fun men and women split from bed
Not for fun mothers ran with babies on their backs;
We rushed into the vast night
Living, not in our homes
But caravanned in hope (23).

This historical phenomenon revisits the existentialist nature of life experienced in the area which border on the antitheses of hope and despair. The poet recounts how the people set out on the journey of no return out of desperation to look for a place of settlement; but were optimistic that they will find a place of safety. Secondly, the circumstances under which the people find themselves is paradoxical in the sense that they see themselves as marginalized and their rich environment turn out to be their greatest undoing since the land which used to be their source of economic, social and political means of livelihood has become the cause of their misfortune. Nevertheless, the persona is optimistic that the power of intellectual activism which is effective in positive transformation will one day resonate and challenge those who exploit the underdog in the land.

When one's socio-political and economic means of livelihood is taken away, the person feels a sense of loss or homelessness since the environment is fundamental to every human being. The people in the region live like refugees on their land because the Nigerian governments in conjunction with multi-national oil companies have continually deployed capitalist policies to exploit them. The theme of both loss of identity and economic activities as captured in this poem is both physical and metaphorical. The indigenous people of Niger Delta consider themselves incarcerated and their environment turned into a death trap since their once enviable environment is contaminated by flares and oil spillage causing them sickness and consequently without any option of freedom or choice in life. The poet laments that life in the Niger Delta is like a prison sentence imposed on them by a kangaroo court because they are not even allowed bail. The poet writes, 'Friend, the day you were born you were sentenced to life/with hard labour/ when you talk/you are liable to prosecution/ I was sentenced before I abused the hard-hearted President in my closet' (9).

This death sentence is further exemplified by the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other compatriots from the Niger Delta. It is this kind of absurdity and injustice that compels the poet into using carefully crafted metonymic symbols which presupposes that a ransom has to be paid to purge the environment of corrupt practices in order to free the people from bondage. With the use these symbols, the poet declares that when he speaks of the Niger Delta environment which he represents, being his birthplace and his serving as their spokesperson; he extends it to the entire nation and the world at large, making the Niger Delta a sacred symbol of his poetic creation. This symbolism is highlighted in Ojaide's 'The Cross':

And I am the one that must shed the blood
 on which the big ones thrive;
 they will only accept my blood type
 which they say is light and sweet, so digestible.
 They have grown so fat in the neck, so beastly
 they know the forbidden dishes they consume.
 They want my blood to keep the country one,
 they want my blood to bring peace to the states,
 they need my blood to double and redouble their
 wealth (73).

In this codification, when he speaks of the common people of the Niger Delta, he is involved in their plight. Thus, he aligns with the exploited minority group in Nigeria who feel threatened and suffer from fear of uncertainty in life. The various forms of exploitation and oppression which the people experience have forced the persona to metamorphose into a brute in order to deal with the oppressors and expel them from their land. The key to liberation in such an unjust society is sacrifice which the poet offers in his eco-activism. 'My Heart' in Ojaide's *Labyrinths of...* contextualises this essence. The persona offers his blood as ransom in exchange to redeem his people from the manipulation of despots whom he refers to as 'owl,' 'tortoise,' 'greedy,' 'tricky,' and the 'people's plague' (5). These images depict the oppressors as greedy and corrupt because they exploit their victims. Ojaide is remarkable for utilising apt animal symbols to depict corrupt Nigerian politicians. Also his frequent use of images of the eagle, hyna, tiger, fowl, vulture, tortoise, owl, crocodile, etc gotten from African culture cuts across many of his poetry collections. His 'Message of Lust' in *Labyrinths...* validates this assertion. Also the use of 'heart' in Ojaide's 'My Heart' symbolises the importance of the poet's mission when he offers to redeem his people and humanity generally from their plight.

The poet has not only transformed into a brute in order to crush oppressors, he has also sacrificed his exalted position to align with the downtrodden so that as a group they can form a force to fight injustice:

My heart is a brute let loose
 It has pushed me from the pulpit to the floor
 and this has always been the joy of the heart,
 seeing me down-to-earth.
 I have cherished mean things because they are
 my heart's desire (5).

The above lines attest to the fact that the persona desires to hurt oppressors so that his people will get a fair share of what belongs to them.

As a literary historiographer and a recorder of important events in the history of his people, the poet resorts to Urhobo folklore, history, mythology and legendary figures as tropes to comment on some important incidences in the life of his people. Thus their historic movement and celebrated legendary personages, like Mukoro Mowoe, Essi, Ogidigbo and the mythical King Ogiso attract his attention. The title poem 'Labyrinths of the Delta' records the disruption of cultural institutions which has devastating effects on the economic, social and corporate existence of the ancient people. The poem depicts the movement of the people from their original place to their present environment because they were looking for a place of safety in order to escape from the horrifying treatment of King Ogiso of the ancient Benin Kingdom.

Ogiso choked flaming faggots into men's throats
 Castrated the manly among us, and
 Fell on anybody he loved or scorned.
 We wept at night (23).

Tayo Olafioye (2000) refers to this historic movement when he asserts that the Urhobos under their dreaded king Ogiso suffered because he brutalised and subjected them into slavery (9-10).

Part Two of *Labyrinths of the Delta* captures the people's new environment and recalls through the use of history how the people moved with their culture as they sojourned, but regret that colonialism and the attendant negative effects of industrialization came and destroyed all they had, including their totem symbols:

Let us go to the River
 With drums, goats, and cowries:
 Let us go, draped in our favourite madras,
 Powered and perfumed:
 Let us go to her..
 She called us this way, And we came, absorbing accents
 Into our tongue,
 ...
 We brought along Aridon; our memory,
 And Uhaghwa, our voice for songs.
 ...
 The iguana ran to us like a god to his people...(24).

The poet's allusion to pantheism, mermaids, dead heroes and legendary heroes often compel him to reveal his reliance on ancestral gods for vision, inspiration, blessing and protection.

The poet also engages issues of national importance using the environment as an important tool to promote the entrenchment of human rights, individual freedom and democracy in order to save humanity from despots. The murder of

Ken Saro-Wiwa shows how poets fall victim to wicked leaders. With this, one understands why Ojaide entreats Urhobo deities to guide and protect him on his crusade.

'We Are Many' dwells on environmental degradation. The land which houses many and produces oil for people to use and helps to light the capital city of Nigeria, Abuja and other modern international cities of the world, languishes in darkness. This neglected region has little or no government attention despite the oil revenue derived from the area. The South-South geo-political Zone of Nigeria exemplifies this paradox. Ojaide attacks the gap between the haves and the have-nots and the developed and developing nations of the world. In doing this the poet asserts, "They extract oil from my wet soil/ prospect for iron in my bones / and level my forest for timber' while they' take turns to ride me' in order to 'benefit from my doom' (72). Engaging symbols of death, the poet touches on the politics of the majority and the fate of minority group system in Nigeria where the minority represents the sacrificial lamb and serves as the beast of burden for other groups in the country and international communities. 'The Cross' further demonstrates that the people are saddled with the responsibility of carrying the nation's burden. This predicament is taxing because the consequence is severe on the victims and their ecosystem. Ojaide also portrays himself as a sacrificial lamb that must carry his people's cross because he doubles both as the spokesperson of the group and as well as their messiah:

And I am the one that must shed the blood
on which the big ones thrive;
they will only accept my blood type
which they say is light and sweet, so digestible.
They have grown so fat in the neck, so beastly
they know the forbidden dishes they consume.
They want my blood to keep the country one,
they want my blood to bring peace to the states,
they need my blood to double and redouble their
wealth (73).

He and his people in this metonymic circumstance are one and indivisible. The poet presents his blood as a metaphor of the oil which is regularly siphoned from his area and chartered to benefit others at the expense of the poor communities in the Niger Delta. The cardinal point of his message in these unequal circumstances is inherent in the distribution of wealth in Nigeria which results in the indigenous communities calling for resource control and fiscal federalism in Nigeria.

Ojaide's eco-activism pushes him to support local resistance movements in the area. Hence the persona in 'The Cross' resorts to guerrilla warfare. The poet writes, 'It is guerrilla war' that 'I must wage' as 'small as I am/to live in this helpless land' (73). He opts for guerrilla warfare using his poetry as ammunition. With apt deployment of symbols and metaphors, the poet presents the economic carnage and injustice going on in the land which has shifted from the usual African literary presentation of the idyllic Niger Delta environment of the old to the endangered environment of today. Despite the destruction going on in the land, the poet is optimistic that one day, the forces of oppression will be overrun.

The Blood of Peace resonates between the antithesis of imprisonment and freedom using the metaphor of sacrifice. This implies that blood, a cleanser, has to be offered as ransom to liberate the indigenous people from their bondage. Blood also serves as a symbol of rebirth and redemption which also rejuvenates life and is often spilled for peace and freedom to reign. Ojaide's concern in *The Blood...* is altruistic and charitable. Hence, he insists that his people must get a fair share of what belongs to them.

'The Fisherman's Dream' captures the predicament of the fishing industry in the area which has become a nightmare for fish farmers. The rivers have dried up, polluted or served as death traps for the people and fishes have disappeared from the water owing to oil spillage and gas flares from oil drilling which contaminate the whole environment. The poet creates parched scenery which hinders agricultural and fish farming in the area; making the farmers to live in abject poverty since they have been forced out of business. Capitalist activities in form of oil exploration and industrialization which suddenly sprang up in the area are targeted towards profit making ventures. The pollution which degrades the environment also causes diseases for the people and drives away their deities from their natural place of inhabitant. This destruction is total because it affects the people, their land and culture. Gedicks articulates Ojaide's message in 'The Fisherman's Dream' when he argues that the international oil corporations explore the frontier regions for new supplies. He asserts that the correlation between the need for petroleum resources and the increasing demand on the communities for their crude oil to feed the industrialiser is endless and destructive. The villagers who depend on their land for economic sustenance are currently vulnerable to changes in the ecosystem because they rely on the land for subsistence so they suffer from acute toxic wastes because of atmospheric pollution. He concludes that there is always a relationship between the assault on the environment and human rights abuses which the people are subjected to. The multinational oil corporations do not only degrade the environment, they also connive with each succeeding government to deny the people their political and civil rights to resist environmental genocide thereby threatening their resolve to survive.

'For Our Own Reason,' demonstrates that it is not only the land, rivers, streams and air that are contaminated. It portrays that nowhere is safe for both human habitation and farming activities because the ecosystem is disrupted making the land fast becoming a 'haunted residence':

What will we look up to without birds?
beating their wings above our heads
what will we look up to without trees

thrusting their arms into the sky
 what will we look up to without the crest of hills?
 Our roots drive deep into the soil
 they sustain us in our search for fortune (23).

The fauna and flora face the danger of extinction which will make the world unlivable. In condemning environmental degradation, Ojaide also recognise and celebrate nature as temperate and peaceful. He recounts in *Ordering the African Imaginations* that he was startled with the swiftness with which things changed in the Niger Delta because of industrialisation. In critiquing the technologically driven destruction of the earth, the poet reiterates the historical encounter in the following lines:

The great change came with the arrival of Shell-BP, the oil-drilling multinational in the Niger Delta about 1958. In the Urhobo area we heard of Shell's simultaneous presence in Oloibiri, Bonny, and other eastern parts of Ijoland. My childhood memoir, *Great Boys: Years of Childhood*, and a collection of poems on the impact of modern Western technology on traditional African life, *Daydreams of Arts*, deal with the post-Shell presence with its increasing ecological degradation of the Niger Delta. Oil pipes broke and the waters once teeming with fish were polluted and many turned to dead creeks and rivers, which sent fishermen and women out of work. In many areas, including Kokori and Ughelli, Shell flared gas (33-34).

The leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People in the Niger Delta, Garrick Letton recounts a similar experience with great candour :

We have woken up to find our lands devastated by agents of death called oil companies. Our atmosphere has been totally polluted, our lands degraded. Our waters contaminated, our trees poisoned, so much so that our flora and fauna have virtually disappeared (Qtd in Gedicks 47).

What is left of the old pristine environment can only be history which leaves the poet feeling nostalgic. He writes,
 After waking from the nightmare,
 I shed tears
 for the daybreak of Africa (24).

Modern technology which introduced oil exploration in the area, altered the people's occupation and their landscape and the political leadership in the country is unfortunately characterised by corruption, dictatorship, anarchy and ineptitude which have become the bane of Africa's underdevelopment. The class of political 'cabal of flamboyant crooks' leave 'behind the multitude' in a state of comatose (27) and the depth of institutional failure and crises of corruption have not augured well for the poor and their environment. Thus Ojaide consistently draws attention to different phases and types of institutional environmental degradation and the irony of wealth in the area which has left many local people poor.

Ojaide's *Delta Blues...* salutes Ken Saro-Wiwa and his colleagues for their gallantry which cost them their lives. The Nigerian military government under the leadership of late Major General Sani Abacha hanged them. This extra-judicial murder which many considered unjust invigorated Ojaide's protest poetry making him to call for a collaborative fight against injustice. The plight of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the metaphor of the Niger Delta have continually inspired Ojaide. He writes, 'I must chant to earn my griot's name' and 'bow to the master who never forgets my service' (10).

His 'Elegy for the Nine Warriors' demonstrates that the eco-fighters who were unjustly tried and executed are heroes and stand honoured before history. They are the 'nine marchers', 'muses', 'favourite sons', 'eagle' and 'nine eaglets' while their executioners portrayed as villains are referred to as 'contract killer', 'sorcerer', 'cobra', 'demon', 'hangman', 'old cockroach', 'the thief', and the 'commander of roaches' in Aso Rock' (25-26).

Killing of the innocent in traditional African culture is considered an aberration. Hence, Ojaide refers to those who murdered the Ogoni sons as tyrants and Ogiso's grandchildren fathered through an incestuous relationship which is also considered a taboo in Africa. The poet sees the physical, material and spiritual disintegration of the Delta region as a microcosm of what obtains in other parts of the world:

I see victims of arson
 wherever my restless soles
 take me to bear witness.
 The Ethiope waterfront
 Wiped out by prospectors (13).

The 'prospectors' and 'money-mongers' scavenge the land for oil and the land no longer knows peace because incidences of agitations, brutality and criminality take place in the region. Present day society has become materialistic and 'cows' are now 'enthroned' as leaders (22-23). The poet enquires 'With what eyes will Olokun/look at her beneficiaries' since thieves have betrayed their illustrious sons and rid the people of their harvest (22). He looks inward and castigates his colleagues who are insensitive to the demise of their colleague:

In these days of mourning
 some of my fellow singers laugh
 O Muse, reject their claim on you

These children who laugh at their naked mother
 Incur the wrath of their creator-goddess
 They forfeit their kinship, these bastards (26).

As pacesetters and consciences of their societies, writers should condemn injustice. But when writers fail to do so, it indicates the height of moral decadence that has robbed the society of its values. He laments that the 'sorcerer' and the 'cobra' that killed Saro-Wiwa still lives, while he grieves over his death (27-28). He calls on writers, human rights activists, the intelligentsia, patriotic Nigerians and the international comity of nations to speak up with one voice in the pursuit of what Ken Saro-Wiwa died for.

The poet appears in support of the local militias in the Niger Delta. 'At the Kaiama Bridge' and 'For the Egbesu Boys' are dedicated to the warriors who fight for justice and freedom in the land. To prompt them to action he asks, 'Is revolution dead and must the Egbesu Boys surrender to the lords'. He is confrontational and so he urges the warriors not to retreat from the war thrust on them by the 'mercenary army'. The resistant movements that take place in the area may have to involve dialogue and corroboration with government and non-governmental agencies to obtain a lasting solution. Ojaide's thrust in *Delta Blues* is that of lamentation and a feeling of insecurity of a disadvantaged people having been dispossessed of their land. One also encounters Ojaide's resolve to continue the fight which Saro-Wiwa personified.

Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* is embedded in a web of complexities which revolves around the environment, history, social, economic and political concerns in the Niger Delta, Nigeria and the world at large. Deploying a variety of styles, the poet persona hurls abuses at those who destroy the area and aligns with the disadvantaged lot who are denied the necessities of life and whose cause gives him the impetus to fight. His vision of social justice upholds the moral values of individual freedom, fairness and equity which run in consonance with democratic tenets.

'The goat song' articulates the disturbing paradox of power politics and the brutality which takes place in a nation that does not have respect for human rights and so the disadvantaged are forced to 'wear smiles over deep wounds'(9-10). Using sarcasm, the persona registers the people's grievances and types of abuses which they suffer:

they are rounded into a guarded prison
 South-South of the mountain palace
 where the king and his consorts carouse;
 a bacchanalia that breaks the rock of reason.
 The capital so afflicted with flatulence,
 Only thunder can halt insatiable hands. (9-10).

In subsequent stanzas, Ojaide implies that their ancestors choke with flares from the flaring of poisonous emission of wastes in their graves. This is because they are constantly incinerated by flares which pollute the land and prevent them from resting in peace even in death.

Making use of abundant satire and irony, the poet alludes that the politicians are 'afflicted with flatulence' and that the 'barons' suffer from gluttony. He invokes the gods to 'halt' their 'insatiable hands'. These images depict the politicians as predators and materialistic. Thus, they are addressed as 'Kings', 'consorts', 'bacchanalia', 'insatiable hands', 'lords', 'global lords' and 'carrion lords'. He uses traditional abuse songs and sarcasm to deride and embarrass the oppressors and, if possible to help bring about a social revolution which will overthrow them. He concludes by calling on environmental activists to rise and speak with one voice against those who desecrate the land.

Part Two of *The Tale* ...is intense in the poet's use of abuse song. In 'To the Janjaweed' he registers his peoples' complaints which catapult the reader into realising that the signs are ominous:

May the fire you spread gleefully this way
 scorch you and your family at the other end
 may your patrons in government corridors
 become dead vultures to the entire world
 may the horses you ride to sack villages
 throw you into vainglorious days (58).

Using the style of traditional abuse song, the poet hurls insults at their perceived enemies and goes further to condemn the massacre of blacks in Darfur region of Sudan. This shows that the poet is not only concerned about the injustices that take place in his birthplace; he is also concerned about the entire human race. Ojaide's humanity forces him to condemn any action which he sees as an act of human tragedy.

4. Conclusion

Ojaide's poetry serves as a forceful and a significant form of activism, reconstruction and social mobilization against land appropriation, injustice, corruption and marginalisation. His strong voice reverberates as he delves into the politics and politicization of resource control, fiscal federalism and the distribution of national resources in Nigeria with deep insight and vehemence that is almost unprecedented in the history of protest poetry writing about the Niger Delta. In this manner, he calls for an affirmative action which will give the region power to own and manage its resources in order to improve the lot of the indigenous people. One however, finds in Ojaide a tendency to exhibit an obsessive love for his home environment particularly that of his youth with nostalgia almost as if he is calling for a return to the environmental purity of the past.

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