
The Niger Delta Conundrum: An Assessment of Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Homesongs and Daydream of the Ants and Other Poems*

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Abstract

For some time, there has been a groundswell of agitations by concerned people from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria to free the area of the asphyxiating stranglehold of the people and their resources by forces of oppression and revision in high places. Activists, environmental campaigners and the literati have been vigorously involved in the sustained campaigns to give the region a breather. One such campaigner is Tanure Ojaide whose poetry will be examined in this essay to see how his struggles for the freedom of his people have been shaped. The study employs the Ecocritical approach to the examination of the selected poems. Ecocriticism, a branch of literary criticism, is interested in the interconnectedness of literature, man and his environment. It is a theoretical optic that sees the environment as the focal point of literature of any kind and description, be it poetry (which is the choice for this study), play or prose. It concludes that the deployment of literature in the analysis of the human environment is a desirable and welcome development

Introduction

The major problems besetting the Niger Delta region in Nigeria are those of environmental pollution, physical despoliation and general ecological disasters. The problems are visited on them not only by the Nigerian elite in government but also by multinational oil giants who are goaded by government to devastate the land without let or hindrance. It is in this connection that Agofure insists that Ojaide's poetry "presents the experiences of the marginalised Niger Delta region as manifestations of (the) dehumanisation of the weak by Nigerian rulers in conjunction with multinational oil companies for selfish interests" (p 75). The paradox of the noticeable lack of development in the entire region is harped upon by Ojaide with insistent ardour as a sufficient basis for protest. The quantum of monetary wealth from oil exploration does not manifest in the physical conditions of the region and in the economic life of the indigenous people of the oil bearing communities.

The elite often tout the word "development" as the sole reason for the presence of the oil behemoths in the region although in reality there are scanty evidences of development. This is why Sen notes that "development is a strategically ambiguous phrase adapted to the different needs of those who use it...and it is often the enormous cultural assumptions and presumptions of the West" (p 3). The truth in this position is unassailable. What the West terms development is but the exploitation of the resources of a people who obviously have little or nothing to show for their natural endowments. Ojaide is not alone in the spirited struggle to save the Niger Delta environment from total waste and its people from complete annihilation. Other patriots are conscientiously involved in the rescue mission aimed at the total liberation of the region from endless woes. Other patriots in the literary struggle include John Pepper Clark, FBO Akporobaro, Tony Afejuku, Gabriel Okara and Nnimmo Bassey.

All the literati identified in the foregoing and other compatriots are concentric that the Niger Delta region must be retrieved from the brink of the precipice before matters get to a head and it becomes late irretrievably to embark on any form of damage control.

A Brief on Tanure Ojaide

The poet scholar, Tanure Ojaide, whose lines of poetry form the preoccupation of this paper is an Urhobo, one of the clans in the oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. His parents are of the Agbon Kingdom in Delta State. His Secondary School education took him first to Obinomba and later to Federal Government College, Warri. He graduated from the University of Ibadan with a degree in English before enrolling for a Master's degree in Creative Writing at Syracuse University in the United States of America. He subsequently took a Doctorate from the same University. He was a lecturer at the University of Maiduguri, Delta State University and Kwara State University. He became a Professor at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. For his outstanding contributions to literary scholarship, especially to poetry, he garnered several awards, distinctions and honours. Amongst these are the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the African Region (1987), BBC Arts and African Poetry (1988), Association of Nigerian Authors Poetry prize (1988, 1994, 2003 and 2011) Amongst others, he had taken the Fonlon-Nichols Award and the 2018 Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. His Country, Nigeria, has honoured him with the National Order of Merit for scholastic excellence in 2016. Altogether, Ojaide has written 21 volumes of poetry, 8 books of fiction and 2 of nonfiction.

Theoretical Undergird

Since theory is the bedrock of literary scholarship, an appropriate theoretical background from which the two volumes examined in this paper has been selected: Ecocriticism. It is the literary theory that assesses a literary work, fiction or nonfiction from the perspective of the environment. Specifically, poetry that treats subjects in relation to the human ecology are called ecopoetry and its writers are ecopoets. There are nonfictional works which raise environmental issues just as there are critical essays and treatises which explore ecocentric themes. Scholars in this category include Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm whose seminal publication, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), remains a pathfinder for students and scholars of Ecocriticism as a branch of literary criticism. An acknowledgement of the pioneering efforts of other scholars in Ecocriticism need be made. Raymond William's *The Country and the City* (1973) and Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) illuminate the paths of subsequent scholars in Ecocriticism, Glotfelty and Fromm inclusive.

William Rueckert in an essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" advocates the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature (p 107) just as Betty Roszak and Theodore Roszak depict a scenario where "the artist, like a tree, drinks up nourishment from the depths and from the heights, from the roots and from the air, to bring forth a crown of leaves" (p 223). The importance of nature and the environment is so great that ecocritics have chosen to valorise it. This is why Garrard Mary states that renaissance male artists variously imagined nature as mother, bride, or mistress, positioning themselves as sons, husbands and masters (p 899). Only an article that is cherished can be compared to a mother, bride or mistress as Garrard has done in her evocative comparison.

An insight into the concerns, apprehensions and preoccupations of Ojaide about the terrible fate that has befallen his people is offered by Agofure who submits that the two volumes of poetry studied in this paper "investigate the extent to which the Niger Delta's rich environment is afflicted by decades of oil exploration and exploitation" (p 75). It behoves him to rise eminently and patriotically to demand a fair treatment of his people. And this he has done commendably in stanza after stanza of the poems in both volumes. Writing in the same vein as

Agofure has, Ezeoechi Nwagbara postulates that “in order to make the delta region environmentally sustainable, Ojaide’s poetry advances the possibility of this through resistance, a kind of dissidence poetry couched in Ecocriticism that negates ecological imperialism, a capitalist practice that destroys the Niger Delta environment” (p 19)

One of the poems, “Technology”, offers an insight into the quantum of havoc wreaked by modern developments and inventions in Science and Technology. The oil rigs, the vessels and the barges are all products of new inventions which have been massively deployed to endanger the lives of Niger Deltans through a steady degradation of their land. A portion of the poem is reproduced here:

This started cold-headed strategies...
The bush-rat dug a dungeon
Of infinite outlets...
Ants raised a hill
To cover their habitat of holes
Out for a sliding adversary...
The eagle cast an evil spell
Over the ostrich
To have birds that couldn’t fly
The hawk started endless war
Against the tribe of chicks...
You can see what we were born into! (p 13)

A deeper reading beyond the surface and sapient analysis of this poem will highlight the threats posed by technology because it is covert. The bush-rat that digs a dungeon of infinite outlets could well parody the drilling equipment deployed to burrow the earth and seas in search of the black gold, oil. The eagle is known for its tremendous energy, ability to fly long distances and sharp eyesight which enables it to swoop on lesser birds for food. The eagle casting an evil spell on the ostrich will therefore, symbolise the predatory antics of multinationals and their conniving and collaborative insiders who exploit and oppress the poor and the weak, mindlessly. The hawk, noted for its congenital hatred for chicks against whom it has “started an endless war”, will adequately convey the burlesque of the merciless, predatory (mis)leaders for the hapless and helpless displaced owners of the land. The last line of the quote, “You can see what we were born into” is at once a song of lamentation and of despair in the face of what the poet perceives as a near hopeless circumstance.

The poet is remarkably confrontational in “Compound Blues” where he threatens to clear any obstacle erected in his way to prevent him from the attainment of freedom and the good life of full opportunities and abundance. He thunders:

Whenever a wall rises in my front,
I crave to tear it down
And ride through the rubble
To see what it used to hide... (p 10)

A wall, speaking metaphorically, is capable of assuming differentiated meanings. In a single breath, it could be a veil pulled in the eyes of the people whose property is being stolen to prevent them from seeing the enormity of the sleaze. It could also mean a barrier, a cordon to shut out the prying and inquisitive gaze of environmental activists and campaigners who may protest the glaring injustice if a wall has not been erected. It is a call to the people to follow his example in so far as he is not the only person against whom a barricade has been erected. The “wall” which ostensibly was erected by capitalism must be demolished in the overall interest of the people because Ury opines that “capitalism has gone too far, devouring the very preconditions of economic and social life, problematizing its own long term viability... and

demonstrating (an) extraordinary level of dysfunction and disequilibrium” (p 50). This position could not have been more appropriately taken and forcefully canvassed. In yet another poem, “The Day Dream of Ants”, Ojaide excoriates both local and foreign exploiters who team up with government officials to dupe the masses of the people by dispossessing them of their legitimate inheritance. He is not comfortable with the boastfulness of the mischievous business men who say:

We are in league with powers
To wreck one vision
With lust for more visions
To refashion a proud world
With the same hands that raise a storm of dust... (p 15).

With power comes corruption and absolute corruption comes with absolute power. This appears to be the case with evil minded swindlers who appropriate the collective patrimony of the people and speak vauntingly about their connections with the powers that be at whose behest any indignity will go unchallenged. The situation becomes more worrisome because the military jack boots have circumscribed the rights of citizens. Amid Ojaide’s protests and tough talking, it appears that his operational strategies favour developmental ambivalence. In a single breadth he could blow excessively hot and in another he could be cold and patronising. This is seen in the note of hope he hums in “To refashion a proud world//with the same hands that raise a storm of dust”. He is optimistic that a new order will be restored from the ashes of the present social upheaval. A sympathetic handling of all issues that affect the environment need be embraced. The prevalent cut throat capitalism must be forced to accommodate the urgent need to restore a friendlier ecosystem. That will certainly herald “a proud world”.

The poem, ‘A T & T’ draws richly from the reminiscences of the poet about the unadulterated purity and sedateness of his ecosystem as a youth and the cacophony of disjointed economic policies that have robbed his people of livelihood and the environment its greenery. The whole physical environment has been so denatured that the poet is forced to say:

When I first entered the AT & P
On excursion from St George’s
It was next to the largest sawmill
On earth, we were told...
When a decade I went home...
A big clearing welcomed me;
No longer the unending sheet of green
No trees had reprieve from the axe...
The waterfront taken over
By phalanges of water hyacinth...(p 30-31).

From the lines above we hear the loud complaints of the poet that the verdant lushness which he grew to know had vanished and given way to mere emptiness. The vast number of trees had been felled without any consideration for replacing them. The earth has been robbed of both beauty and sustenance. Since the waterfronts had been taken over by “phalanges of water hyacinth”, water transportation has been impeded in addition to the impracticality of fish farming. In short, aquatic life has ceased to exist much to the disadvantage of man and his economic well-being. It is this reality that makes Derick *et al* admonish that “it is long past time for those who care about life on earth to take actions necessary to stop this culture from destroying every living being” (p 1).

The second collection of poems considered in this essay is *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. The poet explains that the poems are in two divisions which are dedicated to illustrious personages of the Niger Delta. The first of these is Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa, author, essayist,

environmentalist and rights activist who was murdered by the state for his vociferous defence of the people of the Niger Delta and their rights whilst the other is Ezekiel Opkan. The poems are a pot-pourri of lamentations about issues that pertain specifically to the environment and dirges and elegies for the fallen sons of the region who were cut down in their prime by agents of the state for their principled opposition to the ill treatment that is meted to the people by government.

‘Delta Blues’ fires the first salvo as it charges like an enraged bull at the organisations and corporations whose stock in trade was the unabated despoliation of the region. Ojaide says plaintively:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,
Reels from an immeasurable wound.
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow...
The inheritance I sat on for centuries
Now crushes my body and soul.(p 21)

The poet’s native land which for him was paradisiacal has suddenly turned hellish and ghoulish. The land bleeds from its immeasurable wound because ‘barrels of alchemical flow’ from its bowels to nourish the economies of other lands to the perennial detriment of the region. These thoughts of a sudden replacement of paradise with hell crushes his bone. He stridently condemns the ‘wound’ and injuries suffered by his people because of the degradation of their land and the exploration of their resources with little or no physical development to show for it.

The poet, unremitting in his condemnation of these glaring iniquities, goes further to say:

The rivers are dark-veined,
A course of perennial draughts
This house of salt and fish
Stilted in mangroves, market of barter
Always welcomes others...
Hosts and guests flourished
On palm oil, yams and *garri*
The home of plants and birds
Least expected a stampede:
There’s no refuge east or west,
North or south of this paradise (p 21).

The loud lamentations seen in these lines speak to the volume of destruction the environment has suffered and the permanent alteration of the *modus vivendi* of the *Urhobo* people in particular and other peoples of the Niger Delta taken together.

The poem, titled ‘Wails’ is appropriately assigned that dolorous heading on account of the personal grief and sense of loss felt by Ojaide and his members of the brotherhood of the pen. Author, rights activist and environmentalist, Kenule Saro-Wiwa had just been murdered by the State and his cruel killing by the hangman’s noose is the kernel of this elegiac poem. Dirgeful and funereal, relevant lines of the poem read as follows:

Another ANA meeting will be called
And singers gather.
I will look all over
And see a space
That can take more than a hundred—
The elephant never hides.
I asked the gods of songs

Whether all the singers will come'
But that silent space
That can take more than a hundred
Stares at me with nostalgia
And gives me feverish cold.
I won't find one singer
When another ANA meeting will be called

.....
My forest of friends cut down,
Now dust taunts my memory (p 17)

The lines above have been quoted *in extenso* because it comes to term with the grim reality of the eternal loss of a strong member and voice in the Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA. The visibility of Saro-Wiwa is compared to the behemoth size of an elephant, a large land animal which can be seen without any strain to the human eye. Saro-Wiwa, the intrepid defender of the rights of Ogoni people is the elephant whose space that can "take more than a hundred" has now become vacant, and holds the poet spell bound as he stares vacuously at it. Ojaide's bewailment dredges up the mournful reportage by prophet Jeremiah of the death or captivity of Israelites. The prophet had bemoaned:

A noise was heard in Ramah,
Wailing and loud lamentation
Rachael weeping for her children,
She refused to be consoled'
Because they were no more (Jeremiah 31: 15).

The grief amongst the Nigerian authors can only equate with the gory picture painted by Jeremiah in the foregoing. This is because a "forest of friends" has been cut down. It is noteworthy to highlight the connection between the fallen writer who is being remembered by Ojaide here and the overall theme of environmental degradation and Ecocriticism. One of the strongest defenders of the environment is the writer who has just been mowed down. The symbolism of his untimely death in controversial circumstances is the continuation of the rape of his region, the Niger Delta.

In what looks like a season of tribulation and ululation, Ojaide composes another poem, 'Elegy for nine warriors'. In it he recalls the brutal murder of nine Ogoni compatriots who confronted the blood thirsty military Head of State in Nigeria to demand a decent treatment of the Niger Delta people and a fair share of the allocation of resources extracted from the region. The poet writes pointedly:

Those I remember in my song
Will outlive this ghoulish season,
Dawn will outlive the long night.
I hear voices stifled by the hangman,
An old cockroach in the groins of Aso Rock.
Those I remember with this notes
Walk back erect from the stake...(p 25).

Ojaide foretells that the struggle for the emancipation of the region will not be truncated by the killing of the activist compatriots because "those I remember with these notes//walk back erect from the stake". This means they may have been physically eliminated on the orders of the fiendish leadership, the ideals for which they lived, struggled and died have been firmly etched in the consciousness of their surviving compatriots. They would have walked back from the stakes if the struggle for the freedom of their people persists. This is exactly the case.

A terrible spectre of total annihilation stares the oil bearing region in the face and forces Ojaide to write "When green was the lingua franca". The depressing story of despoliation in the Niger Delta cannot be fully captured in haste. The process is a continuous, almost unending one. Some of the atrocities perpetrated by multinational oil companies are detailed here for readers to know:

Then Shell broke the bond
with quakes and a hell
of flakes. Stoking a hearth
under God's very behind!...
.....
I see victims of arson
Whenever my restless soles
Take me to bear witness.
The Ethiope water front
Wiped out by prospectors-
So many trees beheaded
And streams mortally poisoned
In the name of jobs and wealth! (p 13)

The gradual but steady decapitation of the environment is symbolised by the use of "beheaded, wiped out, mortally poisoned, victims of arson " etc. in the lines of this poem. The poet decries these scary possibilities by advocating that the environment be treated fairly to make it continuously supportive of life for mankind. It is in this connection that Heidegger disagrees with the "metaphysical presuppositions responsible for ecological destruction- a transformed awareness of what humanity and nature are would lead spontaneously to a transformation of society" (Zimmerman, 195). It is to this transformation of society that Ojaide addresses himself studiously and spiritedly.

Conclusion.

In concluding this treatise, it has become clear that the Ecocritical standpoint of literary criticism has been useful in the analysis of the two collections of Tanure Ojaide's poetry espoused in it. Taking him at his words, Ojaide says:

My view is to touch people's mind about what is happening in the Niger Delta through imaginative reconstruction of episodes, events and situations. And these issues should draw sensitivity to (the) idea about the environment and society which concerns everybody.....I am fighting this battle from an intellectual, imaginative and emotional level, from a level that people will be more sensitive to what is happening and that has nothing to do with violence and the politics of it (Onyerionwu 326).

This is a fitting way to end an essay on a topic that is devoted to the confrontation with injustice in high places especially against the environment, using the instrumentality of poetry. The relevance of literature, especially of the poetic genre, in the critical assessment of eco studies cannot be over emphasised.

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