

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF TANURE OJAIDE

Grace Wanjiku Mwangi and Alice Njeri Kamau

Literature, Linguistics & Foreign Languages Department, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17434871>

Abstract

Tanure Ojaide, like many Niger Delta poets, employs combative poetry to protest social inequalities and injustices in Nigeria. This paper examines selected volumes, including Delta Blues and Home Songs and Daydream of Ants and Other Poems, to illustrate the poet's critique of societal infractions. The study underscores the role of writers, particularly poets, in reawakening leaders to consider citizens in policy planning and execution and in encouraging the public to reject unjust laws. By fostering dialogue between the governed and their leaders, literature can facilitate compromise on contentious issues. The analysis is informed by Ecocriticism, which examines the interdependence between humans and the environment and literature's role in resolving related conflicts, and Sociological Critical Theory, which situates literary themes within social realities. Drawing on these frameworks, the paper concludes that poetry remains socially relevant when it mediates understanding and collaboration between governments and citizens, contributing to the common good.

Keywords: Protest, Ecocriticism, Despoliation, Deforestation, Sociological Critical Theory

INTRODUCTION

The health of humankind depends almost entirely on the quality of environment they inhabit. This is why literary pundits have taken it upon themselves to intervene decisively in matters affecting the environment and the place of humankind in it. The poetry of many poets has delved into this subject with a view to finding a common ground to resolve knotty issues about the environment and its denizens. In particular, the poetry of Tanure Ojaide focuses on the infractions on the Niger Delta space being a scion of that region. The natural endowments of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria make it the hub of mining and extractive activities on a very large scale. Multinational companies and conglomerates are located strategically in that region to do multimillion-dollar business. It is baneful and agonizing that the activities of oil companies and associated businesses leave the land degraded and despoiled. The entire environment is polluted because of effluents from gas flaring. The waters are rendered unuseable either for direct consumption or for fish farming. This litany of woes and complaints has resulted in bitter complaints from the occupants of the oil rich region. Amongst the complainants are the elite amongst whom poets are situated. From that region alone, there are many poets of note amongst whom are the revered John Pepper Clark, Odia

Ofeimun, FBO Akporobaro, Tanure Ojaide, Dennis Osadebey, Ebi Yeibo etc. All of them are concentric in their bitterness against the oppressive system that takes without giving back leaving a trail of blood, anguish and disequilibrium in their land.

Theoretical Framework

In the exploration of the issues in this paper, the literary theory known as Ecocriticism will be deployed. It is one of several theories used in literary studies to increase understanding and awareness about an area of research. In particular, Ecocriticism is interested in the way that literature helps to resolve issues between humankind and the environment in which they live. Literature and ecology grapple to unlock the problems bedeviling humankind in their daily living in an environment that is badly affected by the actions and inactions of humankind who, in the first place, should be interested in making the environment an Eldorado. Proponents of this literary theory include Cherryl Glotfelty, whose collaborative work with Harold Fromm, titled *The Ecocriticism Reader* (2006) is a landmark publication which offers a deep insight into how humans relate meaningfully with their environment. Predating the efforts of Cherryl and Harold are other pioneering works in the realm of ecocriticism. This discipline owes much to the pioneering works of other scholars like Raymond William, a British writer whose treatise, *The Country and the City* (1973) was an insightful commentary on pastoral literature. The discipline assumes a global character as Joseph Meeker, an American wrote *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and Play Ethics* (1974). Whilst dutifully acknowledging the seminal contributions of the authors referred to above, it is crucially important to recognize that the term “Ecocriticism” owes its origin to a scholar and critic called William Rueckert. Before the word later gained currency and global acceptance, he it was who invented it in his Essay titled, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. (1978). Gleaned from the writings of Glotfelty and Fromm, Ruckert looks at Ecocriticism as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature (107).

Glotfelty, whose writings, either as single author or in collaboration with others, have taken Ecocriticism to higher heights, states that the discipline “takes on earth-centred approach to literary studies” (xviii). As far as Lawrence Buell is concerned, Ecocriticism studies the “relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of environmental praxis (1091). The tapestry that is woven around all the definitions in the foregoing is that Ecocriticism as a literary theory and tool for investigating literary works is chiefly concerned with humankind and how they fare in their environment. This is why Scott Slovic says that “Ecocriticism is the study of explicitly environmental texts from any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world” (161-162). On a final note, the position of Simon Estok on this subject appears detailed, quite insightful and comprehensive. He says “Ecocriticism is more than simply the study of nature or natural things in literature. Rather, it is a theory that is committed to affecting change by analyzing the function- thematic, artistic, social, historical,

ideological, theoretic al or otherwise of the natural environment or aspects of it represented in documents-literary or others that contribute to material practices in material worlds" (220).

In an effort to shore up the quality of this paper, a supporting theory is seen in the sociological literary theory. In the main, this theory is concerned with the relevance of literary works to the process of finding solutions to the problems that beset and bedevil society. The Wikipedia notes that sociological criticism is literary criticism directed to understanding (or placing) literature in its larger social context; it codifies the literary strategies that are employed to represent social constructs through a sociological methodology. All forms of literature can be accommodated into the description offered in the explanation in the foregoing. Essentially, literature of any genre is expected to mirror and refract society so that corrections and adjustments can be made to social and communal lives where and when necessary.

It is important to dwell on the word "Protest" as a component of the phraseology of the topic of this paper. Omolola Odunowo says that protest literatures are works that address real socio-political issues and express objections to them (2017). Contributing to this discourse from the perspective of a sociologist, Abram Anders submits that the work of art is to be situated as a response to a situation that is essentially social; literature serves a therapeutic role in so far as it diagnoses and dissolves maladaptive social categories and orientations (2011). From the submissions made by writers and scholars examined above, one can conclude without fears of contradictions that protest literature, the kind in which Tanure Ojaide engages, is intended to react to real socio-political and economic issues confronting society. This sort of literature goes a notch higher by proffering solutions to the problems identified, thus serving a therapeutic role.

One after the other, beginning with *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* (1997) and later, *Delta Blues and Homesongs* (1998) this paper now examines the place and purpose of protest literature in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. In the poem "Technology", the rampaging exploitation of the masses of the people in the Niger Delta is brought to the fore. Joyce Agofure laments that this poem "provides a dark parody of the exploitative practices by industrialists on the Nigerian locale. The poem reveals images of the dispossessed Nigerian communities struggling for survival in the encompassment of techno-capitalism" (77). Relevant portions of the poem will illuminate our presentation further:

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! (13).

The verses above concretize the enormity of exploitation visited on both humankind and the environment they inhabit. The dungeon of infinite outlets refers unmistakably to the trenches dug to lay oil bearing pipes from the point of mining to a distant refinery. It is too obvious to contest that the several kilometres of farmland covered by the pipelines are rendered useless by the multinational companies without sparing a thought for compensation for the indigenous owners of the property. The powerlessness of the local populace made up mainly of bucolic peasants under the oppressive jackboots of the exploitative merchants is what Ojaide describes in “the hawk started endless war//against the tribe of chicks...”(13). Philip Aghoghovwia comments on this brutality against humanity and the environment when he says: ...for the local populace at the extraction sites, claims to autochthony and, by implication, indigenous rights are suspended for the oil commodity to flow without hindrance to the international markets. Such is the case for the Niger Delta (4).

The last line of the stanza above, “You can see what we were born into” is both poignant and bristling. It is obvious beyond equivocation that the indigenes of the Niger Delta region, the hotbed of extractive activities have, for long, been derived of the naturalness into which less endangered people were born. The younger population aged below fifty years were born into a degraded environment, into a polluted atmosphere, into famine and deprivation. It is in this connection that Okuyade laments that “oil exploration destroys and reduces the opportunity for human survival” (75). The duty of the poet is it to point at these infractions and urge both government and their foreign collaborators to redress the matters arising expeditiously. The situation becomes exacerbated by the collaboration of locals who point the way to strangers even in darkness. The following lines say it all:

After the reel-legged stork
Sold out the secret of stilts
And opened the trade
For masquerades to market height
In their sleights,
Didn't I in godly deference Want to scrape the sky
And push back my small horizon? (13-14).

From the above, it can be seen that the secrets of a house which should only be known to the head of the family has become an open secret. For rewards, usually pecuniary, the traditional *modus operandi* of the indigenous owners of the land has been made known to outsiders, in this case, large scale industrialists whose main business is to degrade and despoil their land. Worse still, the national government has “opened the trade for masquerades” meaning an oblique reference to foreigners of whatever colour. The overall consequence of the unholy and destructive partnership of the foreigners and their local collaborators is the destruction of an environment made so desolate by the uncanny insularity and indifference of the exploiters to the need for remedial measures to save the entire environment.

In another poem, "Compound Blues", Ojaide laments the utter destruction visited on the land in the name of technology, modernity and expansion. In the process of urbanization, destruction of natural structures must take place. This position is amplified by Derrick Jensen when he says "wealth is measured by one's ability to consume and destroy" (207). Modern day consumption aptly translates to destruction of physical properties of the environment like natural waters, trees, groves, plantations and many more. The relevant lines in the poem are as follows:

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... (10).

Many inferences are possible from the short excerpt above. The symbolism of the "wall" denotatively refers to a barricade that makes access impossible. It also connotes a veil that prevents interactions where necessary. In addition, the wall refers to a man made gulf between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, the proletariat and the bourgeois. In the spirit of this paper, the wall refers specifically to the alienation of humankind from their environment. Ojaide is poised to confront the situation by protesting this unveiled injustice and cruelty, using the instrumentality of literature and, per se, poetry. Capitalist economy has made life increasingly difficult for both the lower and middle class in society. The rhetorical question, "how could we have arrived here?" is a call to his people to rise in unison to firmly demand a better treatment of and relationship with the environment. In yet another poem, "The Daydream of Ants", Tanure Ojaide laments and bemoans the conspiratorial predilections of a section of the people to denounce their own constituencies and work in league with known oppressors of the people. The relevant parts of the poem are reproduced here:

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... (15).

Local people and the national government unwittingly give in to the antics of multinational oil companies to wreck the visions of the country. Nigerians are used to Vision 2000, Vision 2010, Vision 2020 and so many plans to restore the nation to an Eldorado within a stipulated time frame. The masses of the people have always been sorely disappointed beyond verbal expression each time leaders change the goal posts in the middle of matches. So, foreign investors are always ready to ruin any vision to restore normalcy to a nation in the throes of asphyxiation. A deadline was set to end gas flaring with its concomitant health challenges to the Nigerian population and the environment. As this paper is being crafted, gas flaring takes place in the country without an inkling into when it would end. It is these insouciant elements, both local

and foreign, who threaten the restoration of the Nigerian environment that Ojaide rails against with his lines of poetry.

The last poem to be considered in this collection is "A T & P, Sapele". It is a lamentable excoriation of individuals who profit by posing enormous danger to fellow humankind. He may not be wholly disagreeable to the idea of setting up industries that will benefit people. His strong disavowal, however, is the use of such industries to truncate the well-being of the masses of the people. The mindless destruction of the environment and the dangers that such destruction poses may have forced Derrick, et al to say 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" (1). The poem, rendered below, illuminates us further:

When I first entered the A T & 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... (30-31).

In just a space of ten years, an un-imaginable destruction of the environment had taken place. The axe had descended on every standing tree. The result is a vast emptiness of a space once covered in green. When one considers the extent of havoc done in ten years, how pitiable will the situation look like if the picture is painted over a period covering half a century? From the poem, one is able to deduce that one form of destruction leads to another. It is because the trees have all been felled by merciless merchants of timber that the waterfront was taken over

"by phalanges of water hyacinth". It is because of developments of this nature that Scott Russell Sanders notes pointedly that "once a forest is cut down, or a stream is filled with waste, or a wildlife refuge is opened up for drilling, it is virtually impossible to undo the damage" (182). Our focus will be riveted to the second volume of poems used in the treatment of the themes of this discourse. The collection is *Delta Blues and Homesongs*. (1998). The volume is divided into two parts, "Delta Blues" and "Homesongs" with each part dedicated to the memories of two illustrious Nigerians dear to the poet. The first is Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa whilst the other is Ezekiel Opkan. All the 51 poems in the collection resonate the theme of environmentalism. His passion for a re-greened environment in his country, in general, and in his Niger Delta region, in particular, is the motivation and fillip for writing poetry of the hue that he writes. The harsh and grating tone of protest is heard in virtually all the poems. The poem, "Delta Blues", is a strident condemnation of the activities of those whose stock in trade is the devaluation of the environment. In a generous show of sheer reverence and veneration of the environment, Ojaide in the poem under reference says:

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

The rivers are dark-veined,

A course of perennial draughts.

This home of salt and fish

Stilted in mangroves, market of barter,

Always welcomes others—

Hosts and guests flourished

On palm oil, yams and garri. This home of plants and birds Least expected a stampede: There's no refuge east or west, North or south of this paradise (21).

The poet opens the first stanza with the allure of his land of birth which advisedly he calls "Paradise". Even when living mortals have not visited either paradise or hell, the wish of every person is to rest till eternity in paradise in the unwavering hope of a benefit from the presence of God where there is neither night nor day, hunger nor thirst. It is this fictional place like paradise which now „reels from immeasurable wound“ inflicted on it by the machinery of oil explorers who spare no thought for humankind and their environment as they plunder the earth in search of the black gold. His comparison of the past and the present leaves him entirely despondent and disconsolate. He laments that “barrels of alchemical draughts flow” from the land of his fathers which warehouses crude oil, „an inheritance I sat on for centuries” but which today “crushes my body and soul”. No affliction crushes and humiliates humankind more agonizingly than their deracination from their ancestry, physically and spiritually. The poet recalls years of yore with nostalgia and is pained that want has replaced abundance whilst a land “that always welcomes others” is now taken over by complete strangers in the guise of investment that benefits none in the land. The terrible effect of environmental degradation and air pollution forces the poet to conclude “that there’s no refuge east or west//north or south of this paradise”. This scenario is patently paradoxical, a paradise without refuge!

The next poem is appropriately titled, “Wails” in lamentation of the gruesome murder by hanging of a writer, political activist and environmental campaigner, Ken Saro-Wiwa. He was killed by the military junta in Nigeria for his principled opposition to the continued devastation of Ogoni land, an oil bearing community in Rivers State of Nigeria. He was a prolific writer and author of many books and was once the national President of Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA. The poem is as follows:

Another ANA meeting will be called And singers will gather.

I will look all over

And see a space

That can take more than a hundred— The elephant never hides.

I ask the god 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.
Aridon, give me the voice to raise this wail Beyond high walls.
In one year I have seen
My forest of friends cut down,
Now dust taunts my memory (17).

In this elegiac poetry of protest and ululation, Tanure Ojaide rues the dastardly killing of an eminent member and former President of the Association of Nigerian Authors, Ken Saro Wiwa and eight of his Ogoni compatriots. Wiwa's death symbolizes the death of the struggle against environmental degradation and atmospheric pollution in the Niger Delta region. The imagery of the elephant in describing the late writer and environmentalist depicts the larger than life stature of Wiwa whose life embodies the struggle to free his people from needless misery caused by the degradation and despoliation of their land. The poet is filled with understandable nostalgia that the seat usually occupied by the late writer and activist would be vacant as no one will be suitable enough to fill the yawning vacuum created by the exit of the "Elephant". The main reason for killing Wiwa by the hangman's noose is to silence all oppositions to the degradation of the Niger Delta. Youths had made mining activities impossible for the multinational companies to the chagrin of the unsmiling and desperate head of the military junta at that time in the dark history of Nigeria as a nation. This is why the poet justifiably laments the exit of the most outspoken member of the Ogoni elite and people, whose land and resources were being plundered by an insensitive capitalist cartel. Ojaide's wailing and loud lamentations continue in another poem appropriately titled, "Elegy for nine warriors". This poem is an enjambment of some sort from the poem we have just discussed in the foregoing. While the other poem focuses on Wiwa exclusively, this one widens its dragnet to cover the other compatriots who were similarly hanged for protesting against injustice in the Niger Delta. The relevant portion of the poem is excerpted here:

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 these notes
Will walk back erect from the stake (25).

This poem is, in a single breath, a protest against the unwarranted killing of informed people who boldly speak against infractions on the environment and nature and yet a prophecy that death will not end the struggle to free the environment from the ill treatment it suffers perennially. Knowing the brutality of state and its disavowal of free speech, the poet uses a metonym, "old cockroach" for the grim faced maximum

ruler in the state house known by all in Nigeria as Aso Rock. The poet, in his concluding couplet, notes with defiance steeped in hope that “those I remember with these notes//walk back erect from the stake”. It translates to his unflinching belief that the environment must live no matter how much it is mowed down. Whilst it is true that the physical death of the environmentalists in the hands of a hangman is not reversible, the verses above refer to the undying spirit behind the agitation for a free space to live comfortably in an environment not laid to waste by modernity, civilization and globalism. Ojaide is shouting himself hoarse about the uncompromising need to prevent the environment from falling into total ruins because he shares the same perspective with Everden who notes that humans possess the “influence to make the biosphere uninhabitable and this can produce suicidal results within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not take prompt and concerted action to check the pollution and spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by shortsighted human greed” (14). On a final note, the poem, “When green was the lingua franca” will be considered as one of the veritable literary instruments deployed to attack unfriendly policies and practices aimed at killing the environment finally. The poem reads thus: My childhood stretched One unbroken park Teeming with life.

In the forest green was The lingua franca With many dialects. Everybody’s favourite
Water sparkled...

I remember *erhuvwudjayorho* Such glamorous fish But denied growing big...

Uwara, beauty that defies

Tyranny of *Akpobrisi*

Forest manic and recluse What flesh or fiber fails To capitulate before charm?

Urhurhu grapes coloured

My tongue scarlet

The *Owe* apple fell to me

As cherries and breadfruit

On wind blessed days,

The cotton tree made me

Fly for tossed-out fluffs... (12-13).

The lamentable scenario depicted in the foregoing is probably the reason for Iheka’s thoughts on the need to salvage both human and non-human components of the environment. He notes that “many African societies despite their complexities and differences, are drawn to an ethic of the earth in whose confines certain nonhuman forms, including plants, animals and so on, are considered viable life forms worthy of respect” (7). Iheka argues that there is a natural complementarity between human forms and nonhuman elements that constitute the living space of the environment. This naturalness should be preserved and not desecrated and wasted.

The lushness of the agrarian environment, the verdancy of the plants and the pleasant beauty of the biodiversity of the poet’s locale fill him with the feelings of nostalgia that can find expression only in

poetry. It is all this that has come to naught, no thanks to the despoliation of the pristine naturalness of the conquered environment. From the poet's lamentations, the greenery is gone. At a time, it was the lingua franca but today, a foreign tongue has forced the only language of the indigenous, homogenous people into obsolescence and finally into disuse and extinction. The poet recalls the "glamorous fish" which was "denied growing big". We note a chain of reactions in the alterations to the biodiversity of a given ecosystem. The moment the greenery ceases to exist either because of outright clearing or deforestation, the streams and body of waters will gradually vaporize and cease to be. This is why the fish, whose natural habitat is water, will be "denied growing big". The result in human nutrition is the absence of protein provided by fish and other sea foods. It is this frightening scenario and spectacle that makes Luc Ferry warn us that our "relationship with nature, now, onedirectional, must go from „parasitic" to „symbiotic"" (71). It is in the overall interest of humankind to heed this and other warnings to avoid eventual perdition which an unfair relationship with our environment can make our lot.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the two volumes of poetry used for this study adequately respond to all inquiries about how our environment has been de-natured. It has also shown the efforts made by the denizens of the environment, particularly the human components, to arrest the drift into possible extermination of humanity on the altar of carelessness and indifference. We find the instructive admonitions of Mckibben in this regard quite illuminating and helpful. He says:

If the waves crash up against the beach, eroding dunes and destroying homes, it is not the awesome power of Mother Nature. It is the awesome power of Mother Nature altered by the awesome power of man, who has overpowered in a Century the processes that have been slowly evolving... (51).

The volumes for this study, *Delta Blues and Homesongs* (1997) and *Daydream of the Ant and Other Poems* (1998) have risen eminently as voices of protest in an environment that witnesses continued degradation without a thought for remediation.

References

- Agofure, J. O. (2016). *Modern Nigerian poetry and the environment: An ecocritical study of selected poems of Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare and Nnimmo Bassey* (Ph.D. thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria).
- Aghoghovwia, P. O. (2000). Versifying the environment and the "oil encounter": Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Homesongs*. *Alternation*, 6, 175–196.
- Anders, A. (2011). Pragmatisms by incongruity; "Equipment for living" from Kenneth Burke to Gilles Deleuze. *KB Journal*, 7(2).
- Buell, L. (2005). *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. New York, NY: Blackwell.

- Derrick, J., Aric, M., & Lierre, K. (2011). *Deep green resistance: Strategy to save the planet*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Jensen, D. (2010). *Resistance against empire*. New York, NY: PM Press.
- Everden, N. (1992). *The social creation of nature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ferry, L. (1992). *The new ecological order* (C. Volk, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Iheka, C. (2018). *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological violence, agency and post-colonial resistance in African literature*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- McKibben, B. (2006). *The end of nature*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Okuyade, O. (2013). African cultural art forms, ecocriticism and (eco) logical consciousness: Introduction. In *Essential literature, regreening African landscapes*. London, UK: African Heritage Press.
- Russell, S. S. (1996). Speaking a word for nature. In C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology* (pp. [page numbers]). Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Rueckert, W. (1996). Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism. In C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology* (pp. [page numbers]). Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Slovic, S. (2000). Ecocriticism: Containing multitudes, practicing doctrine. In L. Coupe (Ed.), *The green studies reader: From Romanticism to ecocriticism*. London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge.
- Estok, S. (2001). A report card on ecocriticism. *AUMLA: Journal of the Australian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 96, 220–238.