

The Aesthetics of Social Responsibility: A Study of Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of The Harmattan*

**Enesha, Paul Kennedy Ndubuisi
Imo State University**

Abstract

*The destruction of flora and fauna and the lack of corresponding human and infrastructural development have been the lot of the Niger Delta people from the outset of the exploration of oil in the region. The above situation has led to many physical and intellectual protests. Many writers have evoked the role of the writer in the society in creating the awareness about this scourge, and at the same time, in the strongest terms, condemning same. This paper appraises how the aesthetics of social responsibility is brought to bear in Tanure Ojaide's "The Goat Song," "Lessons from Grandma's Night-Time School," "For the Egbesu Boys," "Tale of the Harmattan," "Dots Within a Circle," and "Quatrain Suite." It examines how Tanure Ojaide mobilizes the poetics of poetry in his revulsion and rejection of the deadly environmental impact of oil exploitation and exploration in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. To achieve the above aim, an interpretation of the above mentioned poems from his poetry collection *The tale of the Harmattan* is within the theoretical framework of ecocriticism.*

Introduction

"All socially conscious artistes," Romanus Egudu writes, are "to persuade, and to reproach where and when necessary" (1). He was, in fact, trying to explicate Socrates' contention which holds that an artist is supposed to be the watchdog of his society – or as he puts it, its "gadfly," reproaching, correcting and redirecting its footsteps. Socrates posits that he is the gadfly that watches his

society and helps steer it in the right course, when he was accused of criticizing very powerful political office holders in his society. His assertion/defence is captured in Plato's *Dialogues*:

I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing, persuading, and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that you may feel out of temper ... and easily strike me dead [...] and then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless God in his care of you send you another gadfly. (364)

In Africa, from the preliterate time till date, poets like in other Continents of the world occupy an important position for praise or in condemnation of our human conduct and values. The African society has never failed to recognize this central role of poets and poetry. In appreciation of the role of poets in our human relationship, one readily calls to mind Percy Bysshe Shelley's classical assertion:

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared were called in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises of and unites both these characters. For, he not only beholds intensely the present as it is and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered. But he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. (748)

It is in view of the above that the aesthetic and utilitarian pendulum of art is weighed within the context of place and time under which Ojaide writes.

Aesthetics of Social Responsibility

The economic base of Nigeria has been oil driven one over decades. From the time oil was discovered in the Niger Delta part of Nigeria till present, efforts in oil exportation and exploration have never ceased – rather, such efforts correspond to the unimaginable magnitude of environmental devastation on the oil bearing communities. The lure of this “black Gold” is highly irresistible because of increasing pecuniary value it generates and unfortunately the Nigerian government has never done the needful in the protection of ecosystem of the oil bearing communities. Rather, this government has always joined the expatriate oil companies in denying the oil producing communities and landlords their economic rights and environmental protections arising from the exploitation and exploration of oil. This inhuman and environmental destruction and neglect arising from oil exploration attracted vocal voices in the region and beyond. Despite the vocal and physical protests against the ecological destruction, there is no corresponding robust infrastructural development to ameliorate the suffering of the masses. Rather, the destruction continues to gain momentum as many people began to be afraid of their life and that of their generation in that region because of the destructive environmental aspect of oil drilling, flaring and spillage.

Literature being a change facilitating discipline has always served effectively in the recording and mobilization of the people for a positive change. It is in the above context that Tanure Ojaide and other environmental activists and conservationists use poetry to bring to light the exploitation and devastation of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

In our exploration of some of the selected poems from Ojaide’s collection, our attention is drawn to Uzoechi Nwagbara’s succinct observation on the context under which Ojaide writes:

Following such a polluted socio-economic landscape, Nigerian writers have risen to the occasion by using art to address as well as to bring to the knowledge of humanity this form of environmental devastation and inhumanity. The poet, Tanure Ojaide is one of them. The hallmark of Ojaide's art is to use literature to engage the realities in his milieu. For him, literature is a reproduction of social experiences; it is a refraction of the totality of human experience. (18)

Ojaide's *The Tale of Harmattan* is a tale of woes, sadness and destruction of the entire ecosystem by oil companies as well as the conspiratorial stance of the Nigerian government in the ecological crimes in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. This somber and protest voice is evidenced in the first poem, "The Goat song." In this poem, Ojaide is able to voice the deliberate denial of the oil producing communities of their natural resources as well as the pecuniary value arising from such exploration. Rather these communities suffer the hazardous, poisonous gas flaring and oil spillage and total environmental degradation without remedial and compensatory measures. Ojaide's "The Goat Song" typifies this exploitation and degradation:

The capital so afflicted with flatulence,
only thunder can halt insatiable hands
from clearing the commonwealth's table
of cornucopia into paunches of the lords.

Those sitting on wealth are rickety, groveling
on sand; globules of anguish their only share.
And who cares if foreigners found deep
under their bare feet divine gifts of pools
and started to tap the earth's underbelly

for fuel to blaze brushes of progress. (10)

The above lines presented here portray how the government and its agents aids and abates in the plundering of the natural resources of the oil producing communities while the communities helplessly wallow in despair for gross lack of infrastructural development. The situation in the Niger-Delta is very disheartening. The amount of money generated by the government through the sale of oil derived from the Niger Delta if used very well would have provided the much needed, deserved and enduring development in the Niger Delta. The people of the Niger-Delta have never benefited commensurately in form of infrastructural development.

The second section of the poem carries a tone of lamentation, as the poet tells us in the beginning lines, that: “All along wells brought forth rusty colouration/ folks wondered about the sign from beyond/ all along the taste of water from wells exposed what kind gods held underground for the people” (10). In the third section, the poet harps on the remorseless desecration of the respected members of their communities: “They incinerate our dead heroes with flares;/ no hardwood for caskets to accord them honour” (11), and as well warns that perpetrators of these heinous crimes will be brought to justice by gods such as “Ozidi [who] will not forgive the humiliation,” and “Ogidigbo [who] will not forgive the insult” (11). The above humiliation, and injustice perpetrated by the oil companies and the government is clearly underscored in Tambari Ogbnanwii Dick argument:

The unbridled desire by the *nouveau riche* Nigerians to exploit the “black gold” which is the mainstay of the nation’s economy has made the people of the region an endangered species due to environmental degradation. This has been aptly captured by committed writers who believe that natural

resources in a region should rather be a blessing to the people instead of a curse. (37)

In the third and fourth stanza, the poet notes with utter dismay how natural resources belonging to the indigenous populace are exploited in order to develop countries overseas:

The blackened stream is ancestral blood
Tapped away by giant pies into ships
To rejuvenate foreign cities, invigorate markets;
Distant places lit with wonders; here, a blackout. (11)

The II and III sections of the poem, rendered in clear, simple and language, portray the water, air pollutions and deforestation as the lot of the Niger-Delta region. The poem asks rhetorical yet sensitive questions. Again the poem details not only the destruction of the natural environment of the oil bearing communities, but also their destruction and denigration of their ancestral religions symbols. “The goat song” strikes a defiant stance evidenced in the two lines above. In fact, the poem, in one swoop, captures deceit, exploitation, pollution, deforestation, denigration and displacement that are the lots of the oil bearing communities of the Niger-Delta.

The poem “Lesson from grandma’s night-time school” details the nostalgic reminiscences of the unadulterated, peaceful, unity and love that existed before the advent of oil exploration onslaught in the region. Ojaide in this poem contrastively presents lovely, healthy and natural environment when he was young with the present situations of things. It is also instructive to note how Ojaide contrastively places another poem “For my grandchild” next to the “Lesson from grandma’s night-time school” to make a valid case for what was before and what it is now. The former being a peaceful environment and the latter being a destructive one.

Remarkably in the poem, “For the Egbesu Boys,” a call for resistance and fight against the agents of environmental destruction is captured in some of the lines below:

What are the offspring that cannot keep their heritage;
what are devotees that cannot protect their faith?
Who comes to your home to rape your bride
tests your courage before the vile act
what man cannot cover his love with his body
deserves a shameful appellation, nothing better
I call on you, Egbesu,. marshal of the mangrove,
acclaimed war-god of born fishers and farmers. (42-43)

In these lines above, Ojaide compares the oil company as “who comes to your homes to rape your bride to test your courage before the vile act” and asks “what offspring that cannot keep their heritage; what devotee that cannot protect their faith?” The poem is a clarion call for the tradition shepherds and warriors of the land to wage war against the invaders, i.e., the oil companies and the government:

to stand steadfast behind your great boys-true devotees ready to be martyred for you. For the same reason I sang praises of Ogoni youths, I praise you Egbesu Boys in song- you cannot be shackled from enjoying your on land’s blessings; you do the honourable duty of brave sons- fight on. I, devotee of Iwri, colleague of your Ifri, sing this. Egbesu, I invoke your warrior spirit for the boys to triumph over multiple cavalries of capital forces, triumph over those come to throw them out of home. Egbesu Boys, dismiss with your blood the charge of robbery by the coalition of global powers.

You cannot live on your rivers, primeval providers;
they kill the fish population with a sludge of poisons.
You cannot even drink water from anywhere-
they pissed down barrels of arsenic into it.
They flare gas to raise demands for the commodity
and in so doing mangle every farmer's harvest;
They spray the airspace with methanol and insidious
chemicals- you cannot breathe clean air anymore
They set hunger on the loose after you;
they unleashed diseases to devour you.
And do they expect you to sit and be enslaved?
Do they expect you to die without fighting back? (43-
44)

The poem makes references to the historical events in the Niger-Delta especially the Ogoni crises which took the life of some Ogoni men who are today seen by the people of their community as martyrs. The poem beacons the indigenes of the Niger-Delta to fight this devastation and as well as invoke the warriors' spirit for the boys. The fight is between the forces of exploitation and owners of the land being exploited. The poem portrays the oil companies' coalition of global powers and their oil exploration and exploitation as robbers:

Those who bring running fight to the iguana
will lose their breath and withdraw before long
The poaching army will stop by the waterside;
the Navy cannot penetrate the fingers of the Niger
and those who know their land from birth
cannot be pushed out by armed invaders
because they have the ultimate weapons

that frustrate the occupying armada- True sons you are, Egbesu Boys, to come in front to cover your people from death; true devotees, you have shown deep faith and Egbesu arms you with an arsenal of justice that will always triumph in the prolonged battle. Justice is invincible and robbers will be routed despite massive superpower arms they import and multiple billions they commit against justice. One should not fear death and becomes a slave because slavery deprives one of life itself; one cannot live giving up to another what makes one's life. That is no life, without life. (44)

The end of the poem carries a high degree of optimism, a prophecy of victory over what the poem described as “the occupying” “armada”, “robbers”, “poaching army”, and “death.” This tone of optimism in the poem is predicated on the threshold of justice.

Ojaide in his “The tale of the Harmattan” drives its utilitarian and aesthetic values from the vivid, sordid, choking, corrosive and candid portrayal of the state of the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. The ecological collapse of the region is avoidable if the Federal Government of Nigeria and the oil prospecting companies live up to the best standard practice in the oil industry of Europe and the United States of America. This destructive situation is not entirely irreversible but it needs the will and genuine efforts on the part of government. Agitations against the oil spillage, gas flaring, deforestation and destruction of aquatic and botanical lives if addressed can save live and the ecosystem of the region so affected. Regrettably these agitations and calls fall on the deaf ears of the oil companies in the area and the Federal Government who are indeed co-conspirators in what could be termed as “environmental crime against humanity.”

In similar vein, the poem “Dots within a circle” chronicles in a very simple yet revealing language the dysfunctional state of life in the Niger-Delta with regards to their ecosystem:

Crocodiles lose patience under sustained
attack.

Boats make bonfires for depressed
fishermen.

The lingua franca of green lost its alphabet to
poachers.

Cadavers and ailing captives- all that’s left of
the record fleet.

Rain is the heavenly Niger with open
floodgates.

A mute parrot amidst blaring flares.

Neither rising nor setting: the sun consumed
by flames.

Water suffers fatally from smudges of human
excess.

Loud prayers muffle birds singing of dawn.
(15)

The constant attack of the animals, the floods, the gas flaming, the pollutions are represented as agents of displacement and destruction in the Niger-Delta. Similarly, Ojaide’s “Quatrain suite” in vivide and evoking language captures comparatively unadulterated and ecologically destroyed oil bearing landscapes. The poem is couched in a nostalgic and yet inconsolable tones as portrayed in the following quatrains:

the map of my home land has changed.

The Aesthetics of Social Responsibility

The catographer blot out forests and rivers.
Oil wells and flares dot the new landscape
now nobody recognizes the beauty queen's face.
the apiapia cries hysterically, flying over its former
haunt:
“its another planting season and what a cheerlss
sight,
hardly any farmers!” they fled to be servants in the
city.
Who blames bird or migrant, the soil one barren
crust? (18)

Again “Quatrain Suite” to a reasonable extent replicate the revulsion we find in “The goat song” especially 8 and 17 quatrains of the poem. The entire lines of the “Quatrain suit” capture total destruction of the aquatic life, animal habitat and no doubt human habitation on the account of oil exploration:

the eye of the earth beholds a vandalized fortune.
The ear of the earth numb from the deep silence.
Its veins clogged by an abundance of oily grease,
its heart beats an irregular drum that fades away,
The iroko knows not how it can survive the iron era
to welcome eagles to its crown. I wish I knew how.
Globalization is a category-5 hurricane; its direction
escapes forecast – it leaves litters in an insane trail
The rich among us used to boast of the many barrels
of palm oil they produced in the season of industry.
Then came spills and flares that burnt out palm trees.
Today the government and shell toast their oil
fortune.
When the migrant birds return, how will they know
their homes from others in the wilted dominion?

if they stray from the native soil, it's because
flaring winds blew them to where nobody lives. (19-
20)

The quatrain portrayed helpless pictures of displacement, air and water pollution initiated and sustained by the oil exploration.

The whole quatrain of the "Quatrain suite" is indeed a comprehensive testament of destruction and doom orchestrated by the oil exploration. The language of this poem is simply rendered to drive home the nature and details of the environmental destruction in minds of the readers. This poem is more or less "tell it all and as it is" of the environmental destruction of the Niger-Delta. In the poem, the following words and expressions create a deep sense of hopelessness, destruction and inconsolable situation under what the oil bearing communities live: "the poachers," "river dried up," "cartographers blot out our forest and river," "oil wells, flair dot the new landscape," "poachers who blast them out of the naïve existence," "who blames bird or migrant, the soil one barren crust?" "No season grows back flare or suffocated leaves," "green is now scarce commodity in the rain forest," "soil on barren crust," "vandalized fortune," "suicides goes by many names," "decades of genocides," et cetera. The above words and expressions in poetic forms are not only figuratively couched in similes and metaphors, these words are definite statements or indictment on oil exploration in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria and the Federal Government's complacency on the problem. In the number 17 of the quatrain of the poem we have sad note or mourning state of affairs

Conclusion

Ojaide's poems discussed above portray the ecological destruction occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. They tell the story of destruction from the

perspective of the victims of this destruction. With an “eagle eye,” Ojaide presents a heartrending picture of the degree of environmental desecration in the area in question. The poems present a firsthand portraiture, i.e., the nature, degree and the areas of the ecological destruction in a language that is vivid and evocative. The poems create, in the minds of the reader, a devastating impact, and at the same time beckons on the victims and environmental loving people of the world to stand up against this environmental catastrophe. With these poems, Ojaide satisfies his social responsibility as posited above by Socrates and Bysshe with the sensibilities of poetry.

Works Cited

Ango, Zaynab. “Oil, Industrialization, and the Ecology of the Niger Delta: An Ecocritical

Reading of Tanure Ojaide *The Tale of the Harmattan*.”
Ganga Journal of English and Literary Studies, vol. 5, no. 2,
2014.

Dick, Tambari Ogbnanwii. “Sorrow, Blood and Tears as the Leitmotif in Contemporary

Niger Delta: A Study of Selected Poems in Magnus
Abraham-Dukuma’s *Dreams from the Creeks*.” *Global
Journals Inc.*, vol. 16, no. 10, 2016, pp. 37-40.

Egudu, Romanus. *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament*. Macmillan Press,
1978.

Nwagbara, Uzoechi. “Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading of Ojaide’s *Delta Blues* &

Home Songs and Daydream of Ants and Other Poems.”
African Study Monographs, vol. 31, no. 1, 2010, pp. 17-30.

Ojaide, Tanure. *The Tale of the Harmattan*. Kraftgriots, 2015.

Plato. "Apology." *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, 2nd edition, Oxford UP, 1939, pp. 335-77.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Defence of Poetry." *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Frank Kermode and John Hollander, Oxford UP, 1973, pp. 744-62.