

## TALE OF THE HARMATTAN: ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS DISCOURSE IN OJAIDE'S ECO-POETRY

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### **Abstract**

In Nigeria, much of the oil politics and environmental rights-based poetry is anchored on the traumatic experiences of the people of the Niger Delta area. Since the discovery and exploration of oil in this area in 1956, the people have been subjected to acts of bioterrorism through the destruction of their aquatic and terrestrial reserves. The inhabitants of this region exist under travails of oil pollution, gas flaring, and extreme pristine conditions, and survive without good food, roads, electricity, clean air and good drinking water. Poverty breeds prostitution, gas flaring breeds cancer and respiratory diseases, while lack of commensurate duty of care, compensation or corporate responsibility by the multinational oil companies, breed 'bunkering' and further oil spillage, unemployment and youth crisis, arm proliferation and hostage-taking of indigenous and foreign oil workers. Ecological poetry, a subgenre of environmental or green literature, focuses on the relationship between poetry and the natural, sociopolitical and economic environment. Using an eclectic analytical framework, which encompasses the multidisciplinary exigencies of ecocriticism, literary criticism, linguistic and critical discourse analysis, this paper is focused on examining the informational and ideological content of one of Ojaide's collections of eco-poetry, Tale of the Harmattan, as mediated channel, and characterizing the linguistic choices and idioms of feeling devised to communicate ecological currents, attitudes and emotions to a broad mass of the people.

**Keywords:** Environmental rights, Eco-poetry, Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis

### **Introduction: Tanure Ojaide and Environmental Rights Campaign**

In creative writing - poetry, prose and drama- language is the instrument by means of which the writer expresses content, establishes and maintains social relations, constructs situationally relevant texts and achieves aesthetics. Through the use of language, writers and their works have been instrumental in shaping society for generations. Most writers use their art as a forum to present troubling societal issues and demonstrate the belief in the persuasive and informational power of language as a mobilizing agent and revolutionary tool.

Ecological poetry, a subgenre of environmental or green literature, focuses on the relationship between poetry and the natural, sociopolitical and economic environment. In Nigeria, much of the oil politics and environmental rights-based poetry is anchored on the

traumatic experiences of the people of the Niger Delta area. Since the discovery and exploration of oil in this area in 1956, the people have been subjected to acts of bioterrorism through the destruction of their aquatic and terrestrial reserves. The inhabitants of this region exist under travails of oil pollution, gas flaring, and extreme pristine conditions, and survive without good food, roads, electricity, clean air and good drinking water. Poverty breeds prostitution, gas flaring breeds cancer and respiratory diseases, while lack of commensurate duty of care, compensation or corporate responsibility by the multinational oil companies, breed 'bunkering' and further oil spillage, unemployment and youth crisis, arm proliferation and hostage-taking of indigenous and foreign oil workers.

This paper examines how Tanure Ojaide, a Nigerian poet of Niger Delta extraction, appropriates the NigerDelta ecological challenges as creative writing facility, and arranges words in pleasing patterns in order to express some special aspects of the people's ecological experiences in his fifteenth collection of poetry, *The Tale of the Harmattan (Harmattan)*. A cursory look at most of Ojaide's poems in this collection reveals how he uses poetry as instrument for drawing attention to the environmental challenges in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, where the human, terrestrial and aquatic lives are being destroyed by oil pollution, and lack of duty of care by the oil companies doing business in the area. As an environmentally conscious writer, Ojaide uses the medium of poetry to conscientise the people, government and oil companies towards adopting a positive environmental attitude, through adequate duty of care and provision of social and economic goods in the area. In the words of this poet, "literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights" (Ojaide, 1996, p.42). Environmental rights are, in fact, basic human rights, as people's livelihoods, their health, and sometimes their very existence depend upon the quality of and their access to the surrounding environment. They embody access to the unspoiled natural resources that enable survival, including land, shelter, food, water and air.

The approach adopted for this analysis is eclectic because of its certain links with ecocriticism, critical discourse analysis, literary criticism and linguistics. While linguistics is the organised study of language features and pattern, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. (Glotfelty, 1996, p.94). Slovic (1999, pp.1092-3) also explains that ecocriticism is "the study of explicitly environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or conversely the scrutiny of ecological implications and human nature relations in any literary text". In addition, critical discourse analysis is focused on examining the informational content of a text, as well as isolating and characterizing apt lexical items, grammatical structure, symbolism, discourse patterns and various figures of expression employed in the text for effective communication of information and ideological. Thus, using selected texts in Ojaide's collection of poetry, *Tale of the Harmattan* as ecologically mediated channel, this study is focused on characterizing the eco-narratives, linguistic choices, and idioms of feeling devised to communicate ecological currents, attitudes and emotions to a broad mass of the people.

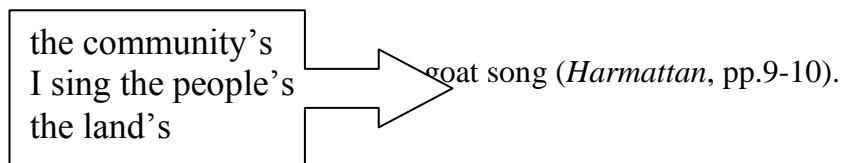
### **Language Use and Environmental Rights Discourse in *The Tale of the Harmattan***

Ojaide's *Tale of the Harmattan* contains poems that focus on the devastation of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria through the activities of the Nigerian government, multinational oil companies doing business in country, as well as Delta local leaders who act as collaborators in the expropriation of their resources and exploitation of their human resources, aquatic and forest reserves. For instance, "The goat song" (*Harmattan*, p.9) is in fact a human lament against the destruction of the Delta environment achieved through various linguistic choices and idioms of feeling. Ordinarily, "the goat song", as grammatical expression, involves a selection rule violation where *goat* selects *songs* in associative construction rather than *cries*,

and pragmatically portends an ominous sign of anguish and death. Using ecological discourse as pragmatics of this text, this ominous sign of death is destruction of the econiche that embodies the people's mega flora and fauna. From the ambience of componential analysis, the + happiness component in the abstract term *songs* violates the negative components (+ pain + anguish) of *cry*. But this is only possible because of the poet's pragmatic shifts in footing from *I* to *goat*. His experience of anguish and pain is thus better expressed by this association of nominal paradigms through dehumanizing metaphors in the pragmatic relations of *goat* and *I* as hyponyms of the persona that underlie his involvement in the ecological anguish he "sings" about. Thus, both the *cry* and its human modulation as *song* co-occur as hyponyms of protest and expression of anguish. Generally, the semantic pejoration of *song* through its associative construction with *goat* quite literally marks the dehumanizing conditions under which the persona and other members of the community whose anguish he/she vents are reduced to.

Extratextually, this recalls Awoonor's rhetorical positioning of this generic permutation: "for what is closer to a cry than a song?" (in Onyema, 2010, p.13). Notice that the complex premodification of *song* by *community's* and *goat*, as nominal rank shifted to adjectives, mark the Delta pain as collective anguish, for which the poet only acts as voice. This massification of pain is further given fillip by the use of plural terms, collective nouns and their consecutive proforms. Thus, the iteration of community, folks, people, devotees, dead heroes, humans, as well as the plural pro forms—they, them, their, our, etcetera—become synonyms in the pragmatics of this discourse.

There is also use of parallel construction in: "I sing the community's goat song;/ I sing the peoples goat song;/ I sing the land's goat song (*Harmattan*, p.10). These repetitive simple declaratives, with the S+V+O structure are not only in syntagmatic association, but also mark *community*, *people* and *land* as nominal and provincial terms in paradigmatic association. Thus:



In other words, the anguish under contemplation is not just collective human pain. It includes the devastation of the non-human and material econiche.

The poet's idea of environmentalism can be said to be organicist as he puts in contemplation the interdependencies among human, nonhuman and elemental lives. Thus, the poet persona laments the goat song in an all-inclusive hyponyms of ecological pains (in my italics): It is not only about "*folks who wear gold over tumours of hope*", "*rounded into a guarded prison/ south- south of the mountain palace*", where "*those sitting on wealth are rickety, groveling on sand; globules of anguish their only share*", those "*who wear smiles over deep wounds*", or "*the dead heroes incinerated with flares* (*Harmattan*, pp.9-10). Rather, the range of victims of eco-violence is semiotically extended through implicit enumeration of further hyponyms of eco-devastation, such that the ominous *song* also becomes about *the blackened stream and ancestral blood* tapped away by giant pipes into ships, *the wind* that laments as its fans burn out, *the trees* that have been shaved of their coiffures by the scorching fire from flares, the danger posed by the dismembered "*snake that is sliding closer to the heart*". In fact the notion of organicism is articulated in the poet's concept of "the big

family” which he fears “is dying out—irokos fall; game/leave in droves, and humans flee to hunger.” (*Harmattan*, p.10).

The poet uses adverse sensory terms to mark the message of trauma and to portray the Delta ecology as body in physical and psychological pain. Thus, terms with negative connotations co-occur with lexemes of violence and co-hyponyms of death. These include *anguish, prison, carouse,, afflicted with flatulence, bacchanalia that breaks, thunder, insatiable hands,, punches, rickety, groveling, globules of anguish, rusty colouration from the wells, deep wounds, dead bodies incinerated with flares, the humiliation and insulted*. These imagistic and gory terms articulate acts and conditions of devastation and pillage “that will not be forgiven”. Similarly, the chiming and semantic extension in “the *blackened stream* that is *ancestral blood*”, connotes pollution of the Delta environment, which is essentially a “waterscape”. The descriptive reference to the Delta landscape as “blackout”, “cemetery”, “death field”, and other indexical that mark “the last cry of its warriors,” are pejorative vocatives, sensory substitutes (or metaphors) in tandem with the discourse of morbidity and occlude the devastation, neglect and spates of martial conflict in the area. The bartering of the people’s health with the rabid quest for oil is articulated rhetorically in the surface interrogative “is health not the greatest wealth?” (*Harmattan*, p. 10).

Notice also the use of contrapuntal terms devised to foreground the image of a peaceful Delta as opposed to the current state of ecological devastation which human and non-human lives suffer. Thus, while the Delta ancestral blood is tapped away to *rejuvenate* foreign cities, *invigorate* markets, *light* distant places with *wonders*, the Delta area by contrast wallops in “blackout”. The expression “here, a black out” (*Harmattan*, p. 10) is a structural elision that semioticises the absence of the good things of life that oil exploration should bring to the ancestral owners. This way the poet builds on background knowledge of this discourse of place, as well as prevailing suffering/ neglect of the Delta creeks and rivers that flow the liquid black gold forcefully expropriated to better the lots of other lands. This force is foregrounded by the use of “taken away”, “snatched away”, peripatetic idioms and verbal phrases combining strong verbs of violence and iterated adverb of distance, dissimilar direction and absence, *away*. There are also kinesic terms used to mark Delta exploitation and devastation. For instance, “*iroko’s fall, game leave* in droves, and humans *flee* to hunger” (*Harmattan*, p.10). The fact that these good things of life are absent in the Delta marks the protest against the pathological distribution of environmental goods and burden in social ecological discourse.

Moreover, the use of contrasting lexemes foregrounds the foregoing as micro-minority or Manichean discourse. For instance, the adverb of place, *here*, marks the poet’s econiche as the troubled region, which naturally anticipates *there* as contrapuntal consecutive. Ojaide actually hails from the Niger Delta area in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. This marker of location is given fillip by further provincial terms used in the text. For instance, “the whole landscape [that] will be a cemetery *south-south*” (*Harmattan*, p. 11) is a provincial description of the Niger Delta area in the South-South geographical zone of Nigeria, also described in the pejorative nominal phrase “a guarded prison” (*Harmattan*, p.9). Note also the contrapuntal description of the oppressors versus the oppressed through contrastive expressions. For instance, *guarded prison* equates “the mountain palace” of opulence; the oil wells inversely bring forth *rusty coloration*; the capital that is “so afflicted with *flatulence*”, just as “those sitting on wealth are (inversely) *rickety, groveling* on sand” (*Harmattan*, p.9). Similarly, the generic contrast between *light* and *blackout* (or darkness) is a stylistic exploitation of the politics of energy / oil exploration as the crux of the Niger Delta environmental crisis.

There is also concretion of abstract terms designed to draw attention to every inhabitant of the econiche. In ecological discourse biocentricism is foregrounded because beyond humankind and animals, every element in the biotic community is affected by environmental pillage. Thus, *wind* an abstract term becomes so concretized that it develops *fans* which in turn become victims of the Delta flare and begin “burning out”. Similarly, imbued with animistic metaphor, the wind *laments* the burning of the Delta ecology just as Mowoe becomes *agitated* and *flaunts* his right forefinger; and, “in self defence, Saro-Wiwa *exhorts* foot soldiers” (*Harmattan*, p. 10). Note that wind, Saro-wiwa and Mowoe, dead heroes of the Niger Delta struggle and legendary figure, are semantically abstract terms and, thus, in paradigmatic association in their evocation of non-presences. This semiotic ascription termed apostrophe in the literary domain is achieved through selection rule violation as non-humans are invoked and imbued with kinetic energy through verbal logistics. This evocation of Delta heroes is also in associative construction with provincial and cultural Delta mythic figures such as Ozidi and Ogidigbo in the following parallel structure:

“Ozidi will not forgive the humiliation/ Ogidigbo will not forgive the insult” (*Harmattan*, p. 10).

Note the use of the strong modal *will not* as frame for protest in the above excerpt. Its iteration works in conjunction with flyting or agonistic name-calling, as evocation of past Delta heroes and mythic personas, to call forth communal and ancestral solidarity and justification for the poet’s cause. “Humiliation”, a sensory term common in hate speech, is iterated here to incite emotional commitment in the fight against the agents of eco-devastation and exploitation in the Delta. This cause is the mobilization of the people for positive environment consciousness, and protection of their environmental rights through the use of force if need be. In fact, this use of maximum force is the focus of “For the Egbesu Boys” (*Harmattan*, p.40; *infra*).

The use of negative or adverse vocatives is also employed by Ojaide to drive his message home and enlist the people’s support. For instance, the multinational oil companies and the collaborating government agencies are referred to in ironical affectation to mock their overbearing and oppressive tendencies: “the carrion lord” “government and the coalition of global lords”. In contrast, the Delta landscape is “guarded prison”, “cemetery, south-south the carousing palace of the king” (*Harmattan*, p 11). Note that ‘global lords’ also refers to the active players in the global market represented by the economically advanced countries and the multinational oil companies, while “palace of the king” is a representative nominal phrase for the presidency or seat of authority in the Nigerian state. The use of “coalition” is pejorative and implicates that the forces against the Delta are formidable, self-serving and conspiratorial. Notice too that Ojaide’s take on globalization is poesy on modernized slavery and freehold exploitation. Thus, he writes about *slave ships* refurbished as *free-market super-takers*” (*Harmattan*, p. 22).

Lexemes and expressions that suggest violence, destruction and death include *tumours*, *afflicted with flatulence*, *thunder*, *paunches for the lords*, *globules of anguish* (*Harmattan*, p 9). Others are *deep wounds*, *incinerate our dead bodies with flares*, *hardwood for caskets*, *humiliation*, *insult*, *blackened stream*, *ancestral blood/tapped away by giant pipes into ships*, the dislodged *snake sliding closer to the heart/and its venom* (that) *intensifies with every strike*” (*Harmattan*, p. 10). This combination of animistic and concretizing metaphors, and emotive terms foreground the Delta “landscape” and “waterscape” as body in both physical and psychological pain. It is also significant the way these adverse lexemes co-occur within ameliorative contexts devised to mark the contradiction of sorts that equally co-occur in the Delta econiche. For instance, Delta “folks wear *gold* over *tumours* of *hope*”; in the same ambivalent way “they wear *smiles* over *deep wounds*” (*Harmattan*, p. 10). In the semantic

reading of notation, *gold* and *tumours of hope* appear as incongruous as *smiles* and *deep wounds*, terms with contradictory signification, especially as *wound* carries+ *agony* as element componentially. However, such contradictions, by their unusual collocates and deliberate lexical selection rule violation, draw attention to the helplessness of the traumatized people of the Delta under the suppression of such very superior forces as the mega nation state and the multinational oil companies; that is, “government and the coalition of global lords/ (who) have snatched away what ancestors sat upon.” (*Harmattan*, p.11).

Literally speaking, this discourse of contradictions, in fact, semiotifies the contradictions in the Delta realities, where the *blessing* of oil, as ancestral gift, turns out as *curse* to the ancestral communities, and *oil boom* inverses to *oil doom* among the people whose scandalous pristine condition is as significant as the many oil wells in the landscape. In the same frame of discourse subversion, the Nigerian “*carrion lord* cares not for the *rot* he stirs; / he pranks with *consorts* in the *death-field*” (*Harmattan*, p. 11; our italics), mark contradictions in the dastardly attitude of the rulers and agents of pollution in Delta lands. Note the foregrounding of *pranks* through category shift of the ordinarily nominal (playing) *pranks* to a verbal category. This positioning marks the ease with which the Nigerian rulers and agents of pollution toy with the human and non-human Delta population. Note also that the Delta images of aridity and drought compare with the ameliorated description ascribed to their oppressors through terms of fecundity, courtesy of the oil loot. Thus, the emasculation of Delta life, forcefully “tapped away”, snatched away” (*Harmattan*, p. 10) is source of blessing to other scapes. Note the terms for forceful evacuation achieved through a reinforcing combination of *tapped away*, *snatched away* and *shaved off* as parallel structures in the end position, which foreground the role of the unnamed agents as new information. Note that as the deltascape turns to “cemetery” and “death field”, from the curse of oil, the same oil is used “to rejuvenate foreign cities, invigorate markets; distant places lit with wonders” (*Harmattan*, p. 10).

The message in “Priests converts and gods” (*Harmattan*, p. 12) is the devastation of the Niger Delta econiche through the dislocation of their psychological, social, economic and spiritual spaces, by anti-conservation agents. Implicated in these ecological crimes are such agentives as the Christian Pentecostal converts, the developers, the Sahara, and oil barons. This is achieved through lexical substitution and semantic shifts meant to foreground the logic and explication of the message. For instance, Christianity, is couched in such generic terms as “Pentecostal converts”, *born again* “animals”, common in discourse of theosophy (*Harmattan*, p. 12; italics, original). Note the orthographical foregrounding of “born again” through italics by changing the typeface. This is used to anticipate/ project an adverse explication of the term for semantic pejoration. This way the poet draws attention to the violation of the Delta cultural space and spiritual scape of animism by alien nations and their local converts:

“*Pentecostal converts* burnt down the *primeval grove*-/ there, they *believed*, witches metamorphosed into owls;/they did not even know what animals they had become,/when they were *born again*, living in *self-renunciation*” (*Harmattan*, p.12). Religious terms (in my italics) are used to implicate theosophy as a current in Ojaide’s eco-preaching. That Pentecostal converts are explicit agentives, in the act of burning down the primeval (ancestral) grove, is symbolic of the poet’s stern condemnation of their denial of the indigenous cosmological perspective. To the poet, this translates to self-abnegation and implicates denial of one’s culture and, in fact, self; that is, “self-renunciation.” The interpolation of “their witches metamorphosed” with the rank shifted clause “they believed” signals the claim as non-factive behaviour and, so, baseless.

Note that the co-occurrence of these lexical paradigms is used to relate the role of these agents as equally impacting negatively on the ecology through their activities that kill not just the physical, but also the spiritual lives of the people. Similarly, this singularity of function translates to lexical bonding that compels a pragmatic treatment of converts, developers, and the Sahara and oil barons as lexical substitution of the “campfire [that] litter the landscapes” (*Harmattan*, p.13). Note also that this impact is implicated in the structure of the text through active constructions that explicitly specify the agents. Thus, it is possible to use Halliday and Mattesien’s (2004) Ergative Model to articulate the implicature of the following active structures:

Pentecostal converts burnt down the primeval grove  
 Subject/doer    trans.verb/action    object/sufferer

These declarative structures embody material clause that could, in its “doing” form, integrate an agent, resulting to + Agent + Process + Medium. Thus:

The developers tore down the forest that covered us  
 Agent            Process            Medium  
 The campfires of oil barons litter the landscape (*Harmattan*, pp.12-3)  
 Agent            Process            Medium

The use of agentive expressions that clearly state the perpetrators of the odious act of environmental destruction is a form of structural exposition that clearly highlights these acts of ecological perfidy and calls on the audience to completely condemn the agents.

There are also terms that express violence, destruction and putrescence. These include *burnt down, tore down, trashed, felled* (more trees), *thrust* ( a blazing firebrand), *devouring*(plants), *gulping* (the River Niger), *litter*(the landscape),*clogged*(streams and creeks), *besieged land, go down the drain, inferno, hell, victims, daily pangs, condemned to burning winds of gas flares and streams, boiling oil so combustible.*( *Harmattan*, pp.12-3). These expressions become, as it were, indexical for articulating the destruction and pains of the victims of ecocide in the Niger Delta. These adverse terms, however, contrast with the more ameliorative terms that are used to describe the primeval state of the Delta before the incursion of pollutants and pollution.

The situation in the Niger Delta is so bad that the poet compares it to hell on earth. Semiotically, the subject of Delta oil and ecological discourse contains *suffering* as superordinate of fire lexemes such as *hell, flare, blazing firebrand, inferno, burning, combustible, burn*. Thus, the poet posits that, to the Deltan, attributing hell to an afterlife is in error: “it is here victims already suffer daily pangs from profiteers/condemned to burning winds of gas flares and streams/of boiling oil so combustible they burn all in their wake” (*Harmattan*, p.13).Notice the contrastive representation of this state of devastation and drought in dissonance with the rhythms of natural fecundity that characterized the pre-crude era of the primeval Delta. This is achieved through sensory terms and thought development couched in details. Thus, through visual terms of appeal, we see “green foliage” and “natural canopies” used as lexical substitutions and pragmatic constituents for ‘forest’ (*Harmattan*, p. 12).There is also co-occurrence of nature terms, “natural” and “green”, as not only semiotics

of the Delta pre-crude fecundity, but as endophoric allusion to the text as green or nature writing. This frame of modification adds to a detailed portrayal of an unpolluted Delta scape, and by implication urges the reader to resist every act of ecocide and strive to recover nature through positive environmental attitudes. That is the only way to appreciate and witness, in visual and emotive terms “the divine *splendor*/when the archer sun shoots *gold-tinted* arrows between leaves” as well as enjoy “the *spectacle* of rain, wearing reeds, *perform* a stilt dance” (*Harmattan*, p. 12). Unfortunately, instead of “public parks”, “the community of plants and animals...”, “they felled more trees for cemeteries,” “burnt down the primeval groove”, and “worship[ed] a foreign accented god” Notice the foregrounding of themes through discourse subversion. For instance, while *forest* is described in alluring terms, *bush* is pejoratively used as term common in the rhetoric of the *other*.

In the text, the first and second person plural pronouns- *we* and *they*- are used to represent sources of this bifocal frame of utterance. This rhetoric of dissent is between natural conservationists (the deprived “we”) and “they”- modernist “developers”, (re)framed as destroyers and harbingers of ecological death “who tore down the forest”, and “felled more trees for cemeteries.” “They” it was who thrust a blazing firebrand at the war god; “they” it was who “failed to appreciate the divine splendor of the forest reserves”. And, in the frame of binary discourse, “we” becomes the antonym of an impetuous and reckless “they” through discourse amelioration.

Similarly, *born again*, (re)defined pejoratively as “living in self-renunciation” by people “who “did not even know what *animals* they had become, is a dehumanizing metaphor that portrays the people in reference in adverse terms. The aim is to call on the people to stick to autochthonous Delta positive ecological values and shun the negative influences of foreign doctrines. Similarly, *hell* misses the vectoral component of + afterlife that Christians know and operates ‘here’ through discourse subversion. Thus, *hellis here* sounds like *here is darkness* cited earlier in “The goat song”. Intertextually, and quite like the Biblical notion of hell, the Delta scape shares the same hyponyms of “hellscape” in the physical and psychological anguish that burns in the entire land. Hell also sounds like ecocritical contraction of (s)hell, popularized in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s extratextual resonance: “the flames of shell are flames of hell” (in Onyema, 2010, p.33).

In “Womb-wrapped” (*Harmattan*, pp.15-6) the poet adopts the same pattern of contrapuntal discourse that sets off the nostalgic Delta past of peaceful nature and fecundity against the present Delta of violence, destruction and death. Thus, a lurid image of the Delta natural past is marked by “womb” as semiotics of fecundity, and beauty found in the “boundless bounty”. Note the phonoaesthetic implicature in the repetition of the bilabial plosive /b/ for abundance and gusto, which translates to an econiche of songs beauty and, in fact, life couched in imagistic lexemes of happiness and songs. Thus, the “forest of birdsong after birdsong”, “chorus from the minstrel mingling with birdsongs”, “the sea (that) litters the sea’s spirits”, “crowd of humans mingling with a cloud of talkative birds to welcome the newly born”, “the MamiWata (that) smiles to herself in her bed of coral”, etc, all semioticise a landscape in communion with nature, in the precrude era when the stream was “herb-dark” (*Harmattan*, pp.15-6).



However, these indices of nature are destroyed as the persona hears “oil blowouts closer and closer”. From this point the semiotics of death and destruction is foregrounded through discourse substitution and subversion:

9

“The stream shrinks and stands still  
at the sight of a snaking oil slick.

10

On either side drum-carving trees-  
I hear heart throbs; mortal fear of fire.

11

The young fisherman caught cowries in his net-  
his priesthood in later years pre-ordained.

12

The fuming forest forages for light;  
every step ambushed by sand dunes.

13

Wearing shell-coated gear,  
The arsonist escapes fingerprinting ( Harmattan, pp.15-6).

This excerpt is rife with linguistic stratagems and verbal logistics used to advance the Delta ecological discourse. For instance, it is rife with frame terms for destruction, violence and death. These include *shrinks*, *standstill*, *snaking oil slick*, *drum-carving trees*, *heart-throbs*, *mortal fear of fire*, *fuming forest forages*, *ambushed*, *sand dunes*, *arsonist*, etc. Notice the interplay of idiophones for phonoaesthetic and iterative effects in the repetitive velar plosive/k/ in *closer and closer*. Similarly, in *fear of fire* and *fuming forest forages*, the repetitive fricative /f/ emits hisses, sighs and disgust from the scape wheezing in pain, just as the repetitive combination of vowels and diphthongs /ea/, /eu/,/u/,/or/ gives it the tone of a threnody, a poem mourning a devastated econiche. The /r/ roll sound exhumes a gliding effect of fire that consumes Delta lands.

Notice also the use of semantic and selection shifts as foregrounding verbal logistics. For instance, the *stream* is so imbued with animistic quality that it could *sight*, *shrink* and *stand still*, all on its own accord; the muse spots not just bosom, but *ample bosom*, the boat *brings* a beauty from the sea, birds became *talkative* rather than chirped. Also, the severity of the effect in the torching of the Delta forest reserves is driven home by imbuing the forest with animistic metaphors such that it *fumes* and *forages*, in consonance with the equally animated sand dunes that develops the tact to *lay ambush* (and) in the forest’s *every step*.

Similarly, there is functional and category rule violation in the *oil slick* that is *snaking*, rather than flowing. This is used to achieve pragmatic bonding between the animate and inanimate objects. Stylistic heightening is also achieved by rank shifting *snake*, a nominal, to a gerundive verb in order to transfer the + dangerous component of *snak[e]ing* as pragmatic epithet to the polluting oil slick. Note also that there is slight dig into the activities of shell, the largest multinational oil company doing business in the Niger Delta, but as the poet refers to the company only in connection with the *gear* worn by the *arsonist* ravaging the Delta ecology. In Ojaide’s ecopoetry, “fire” with its hyponyms- burning, scorching, arson, etc- is a frame term for the devastation that mindless gas flaring brings on the delta environment. The reference to the” Mami Wata” smiling to herself in “her palace of corals” is a semiotic reference and Delta provincial term used to reminiscence on a peaceful scape when humans communed with unpolluted nature and when the cosmology was stable.

To situate this experience in its historical context, the persona writes about the Delta scape of yore in harmony with nature in “Womb-wrapped”. This is achieved through parallel structures and quasi enumerative strategies framed in the *infinitive to-*

*To have loved mammy water in her under water palace of coral: to have had trysts with the moon in her days of full glory, to have tasted one dish and never wished for another, and to have lived here when it was a different country( Harmattan,p.17).*

Note that though this excerpt contains four orthographic lines, the sense actually comes off as conflated quasi- listing of senses in a periodic structure of constituent indices of eco-harmony building up to a significant disruption couched in adjuncts of place and time: “and to have lived here when it was a different country!”(*Harmattan*, p.17). The frame “to have” in associative construction with past action terms (loved, lived, had trysts, tasted) is endophoric in function and connects the past to the present. This past is presented as the natural scape of green, peace and harmony through cross references to concrete and abstract objects as its inhabitants. Thus, “Mami Water in her underwater palace of corals”, “the moon in her days full of glory”, etcetera, form part of the Delta population of natural harmony. However, the dissociation brought about by ecological devastation is marked by lexemes of war, destruction and death that mark the poet as an activist; activism being “militant propagandist action” (*Webster's*). Such lexemes and expression of war include: *army of poachers, resilient spirit, casualty, evacuate, horses galloped through to capture, exile, swarm of locusts, fill of blood and bronze, martyrdom, vandalized fortune, suicide, decades of genocide, millions of victims, predator's paradise, the starving*, among others. The constellation of these human and nonhuman terms mark the extension of casualties of ecological assault as organic and biocentric loss.

The use of *I, me, our, and us*, are personal pronouns that mark the poets direct involvement in the anguish he is writing about. However, humanity, represented by the personae, is not the only population that feels the pain of ecological devastation. Eco-habitation in Ojaide's text acquires semantic extension in the inclusion of nonhuman lives achieved through boicentric listing of such hyponyms as birds, animals, plants, and elemental constituents of terrestrial and aquatic reserves. Thus, the “resilient spirit” of the reed in the tide “drowned in oil slush”, the changed map of the homeland, the forests and rivers blotted out by cartographers of the crude era , the *Apipia* that cries hysterically, leaves flared or suffocated, cycle of self-succeeding generation doomed to die in the oil groove cursed by decades of genocide, palm trees burnt out by spills and flares, birds and beetles that lost their refuge, the people of the creeks that lost their sun, moon and stars to fumes, migrant birds blown to where nobody lives by flaring winds, homes turned to wilted dominion, etcetera, are all victims of the Delta devastated econiche.. In environmental discourse, the suggestions in ojaide's poetry tend towards the apocalypse, in its representation of the total destruction of everything in the delta, where “evergreens bald” and “the soil one barren crust” (*Harmattan*, p.18).

The poet writes spates of contradictions through discourse inversion of the natural order of events to mark an environment that is already turned upside down by agents of ecocide. Expressions that mark displacement and tactile metaphors are used to signify the shift between the old Delta peace and the new Delta of pollution and violence: The “cartographers *blot out* forests and rivers/oil wells and flares dot the new landscape”, memories *chase out* , poachers *blast out* (primeval inhabitants), the axe *chops down* more trees, spills and flares *burnt out* palm trees, evergreens *bald*, every *head bowed down* in

disgrace, *the storm sank sun and moon in gurgling streams and creeks, the entire land a seascape /when my bait-free new hooks caught catfish and mudfish*” (*Harmattan*, p.18).

The poems studied for this paper follow a narrative pattern, just as the pattern of sequencing is chronological. Though the textual reference is a spatial occurrence that span through communities in the Delta econiche, materials flow from the past to the present. The movement covers the three critical stages of Delta ecological history: the green, the palm oil and the crude oil eras. Naturally, these stages are implicated in the Delta socio-political history of pre-colonialism ( of peace, boundless bounty of nature), colonialism( of slavery, exploitation and expropriation of natural resources represented by palm oil) and neocolonialism (of crude oil, multinational and state exploitation, violent destruction and martial conflicts).

In the context of this text, this latter stage also imaged as globalization is the advanced stage of Delta ecocide through tactile terms that implicate violence, lifelessness/death. This is the logic of apocalyptic discourse as globalization is described as “*the iron era*”, “*when wood copulates with iron*” and “*the axe is born and groomed to chop down more trees*” (*Harmattan*, p.18; italics, our emphasis). In fact, the poet, via a descriptive pattern of thought development defines economic globalization pejoratively: “Globalization is a category-5 hurricane; its direction *escapes forecast- it leaves litters in an insane trail*” (*Harmattan*, p.19).

Notice the sensitivity to time and space marked by the following adverbials and time frames that underline the poet as a historical and ecological witness: “when it was a different country”, “now the starving”, “then came spills”, “today the government and shell toast their oil fortune”, “when the migrant birds return”, “decades of genocide”, “my memories”, now another casualty” (*Harmattan*, p.19).

In “ For my grandchildren”( *Harmattan*,p.22), Ojaide draws specific attention to the plight of children as the most vulnerable group in a devastated land, and by implication expresses the bleak future of the Niger Delta area. Delta children, in the context of this text suffer from the devastating effects of oil pollution and martial conflicts generated by government’s show of senseless force. The people’s land and water are devastated leaving them without prospects, while oil exploration is carried out in the manner of slavery “with refilled slave ships as refurbished super tankers/ anchored at Escravos and poaching in land as centuries ago” (*Harmattan*, p.22).

In Ojaide’s verbal logistics, the spate of martial conflicts is conveyed by generic terms in military discourse such as *flares and fumes, slave ships*; “mobile policemen brandish guns in the sun”( *Harmattan*,p.22), retired marines, villages mowed down, dying children and men, etcetera. Significantly, these terms of martial conflict co-occur with terms of oil exploration to underline the major cause of the conflict. Thus, slave ships are refurbished as super-tankers for the exportation of crude forcefully obtained from the Delta to other lands. Notice the implicit chiming of slavery, oil exploration and globalization or free-market economy in lines 5 and 6: “[W]ith crude oil gushing into slave ships/refurbished as free-market super-tankers.” This chiming is iterated in lines 23 and 24 with an extended implication that emplaces this parable of exploitation in a major Delta slave port which now serves as loading point for exportation of crude oil. Thus, the incident of slavery and oil expropriation as gory forms of exploitation become historical experiences that impact negatively on the Delta econiche, with *Escravos* acting as sour spot in its memorialization.

Note the adjuncts of time in “once did”, “stone age”, and the consistent use of past tense narration of events happening “as centuries ago”. Moreover, the economic implication of these historical contacts is that of dislocation or shift from traditional means of livelihood as the persona’s children “can’t fish or tap rubber as [he] once did”. (*Harmattan*, p.22) *Fish*

and *rubber* suggest that people of the Niger delta mainly operated an agrarian economy before the destruction of their aquatic and terrestrial reserves. The implicature for this destruction is marked by the adverse chiming of *river* and *snake*, as well as forest with fumes and flares as transforms in lines 5 and 6: “the river transformed into a snake of a tomb/and the forest fraught with flares and fumes” (*Harmattan*, p.22). Rivers and forests are in associative construction with sensory terms of destruction, suffocation and death as suggested by the danger implicit in the tactile snake of a tomb, the excruciating flares and fumes that violate our senses of sight and touch, and choke our breath/smell. Notice the string of the /f/ fricative in *forest fraught with flares and fumes*” (*Harmattan*, p.22), with resemblance at the physical level: “passage through gaps and obstructions”, “tactile application of pressure”, sounds of the destructive flares (Leech, 1969, p.97).

Note the use of phonoaesthetic metaphors in the *hired retired marines*, *Ogoni's agonies*, *forest fraught with flares and fumes*, *guns in the sun*, etc. *Well*, is an elliptical term for “oil well” regularized here to mark it out as generic term in the pragmatics of oil exploration. Notice also the use of representative expressions to draw attention to the plight of Deltans. For instance, “*villages of imploring eyes marching, hands up –raised with green-leafed branches, mowed down*”(22) largely connotative expressions; just as “*CNN & BBC embedded with Chevron and Shell report that local women stripping before cameras to save their children and men are primitive,*” did so “in their *secure wings*”, not knowing “*Ogoni's agonies*”( *Harmattan*, p.22; our italics).

There are also lexical and structural choices that mark the pains of eco-dislocation and underline the traumatic sensibilities under which victims of ecological destruction live. For instance, the verbal phrase “mowed down” as action term is conveyed in a structure that effaces the identity of the doer(s). According to Onyema (2010), it is possible to understand and explain the ways that language intersects with and implicates traumatic situations, by examining the language of the victims themselves as formal representation of their consciousness, how they can or cannot speak of the atrocities that they have witnessed or experienced. For instance, expression of fear, anxiety, oppositional/ defiant disorder, depression, anger, overt distress and melancholia are states of consciousness achieved using passives with deleted or unknown human agent. “*Ogoni's agonies*”, for instance, appears self-caused, and, thus, implicates fear or reluctance to mention the cause of the agony.

Similarly, *marching* functions as both slight dig into the militarization of the Delta econiche in tune with other military generics like “mobile policemen” that “brandish guns in the sun” and “hired retired marines”. However, the action conveyed in the verbal clause *marching hands up –raised with green-leafed branches* contains yet a rankshifted adverbial clause of manner that modulates *how* the oppressed Deltans were marching in difference to their oppressors. Idiomatically, *hands up-raised* and *green-leafed branches* semiotically peace. *CNN & BBC* are connotatively and literally *embedded with Chevron and Shell* to foreground the alliance between the global press and their multinational companies. The latter compromises the former to skew the interpretation of information to advance the politics of image and reputation used to disable third world economies and justify their continual exploitation.

In “At the Kaiama Bridge” (*Harmattan*, p. pp.33-4), the poet advances this Delta cosmological perspective by listing the “flotillas of river spirits” among the human, animal and plant population as ecological constituents or “congress of life” “hosted” in the Delta “wetlands” of yore, but all of which are now in “retreat” “to where nobody lives”. Note the pragmatic use of drilling wetlands, all with the property of land gone into water, waters have turned to a poisonous brew, we have organized a resistance army, / (we) declared sovereignty over our resources; oil-blackened current suffocating *Mami Wata* and her retinue of water

maids; /they leave fast the inhospitable dominion/ for the freedom and health of the open sea. In sensual terms, the poet valorizes the pre-crude era which he presently misses. Thus, he laments the destruction of “the island’s boat of songs (that) raise ritual paddle in salute to high gods/that astronauts now suffocate with satellites.”

Symbolically, Kaiama is the town in the historic Delta town where the declaration for resource control was made. The town also played host to Isaac Boro and his men during the 12-day revolution for self-governance. Thus, “at the wobbling Kaiama Bridge that holds the delta together”(Harmattan, p. 34)taken collectively, is both an adjunct of place that historicizes the neglect of theDelta, her struggle, as well as a denotative reference to this landmark bridge that literally links most Delta states. This milestone is specifically marked by the relative clause “that holds the Delta together”. However, the use of the gerundive premodifier *wobbling* to qualify the bridge is also ambiguous in its indicting reference to the weakening resolve among the Delta to speak with one voice in ecological rights struggle on the one hand, and the implicature for the infrastructural neglect of the delta goose that lays the liquid golden oil egg, on the other hand.

Notice also the telegraphic use of “mere ashes” as elliptical statement for “the land has become mere ashes”. Telegraphic speech or structural elision is common in discourse of trauma where the victim is under both physical and psychological pressure, and can only utter elliptical structures as spurts of pain. Other spurts of pain occur as lexical transmutation of complex thought into compound or complex lexemes such as diarrhea-infected, force-fed, oil-blackened, oil-soaked etc.

There are also political shibboleths and vogue terms used to give currency to the Delta historical exploitation and accord it both diachronic and synchronic relevance. The use of the personal pronoun *Iwe* and *our* mark the personal involvement of the poet in the experiences being recanted and incite genuine emotions in and enlist support from the reader. For instance: “I see them retreat”, “I see the oil-blackened current”, “we have organized... we have declared sovereignty over our resources”, etc., all mark the direct involvement of the poet and also ensure rhetorical fidelity emotionally and ethically. In addition, provincial terms such as southward flow, regatta, island, waterway Egbesu boys, Kaiama Bridge, Delta, fishermen, boats, swimmers, etcetera, serve as representations that mark the text as literature of place, with specific location in the riverine communities of the Delta lands south of Nigeria.

In the poem “Without the trees” (*Harmattan, p.38*), Ojaide also provides a rhetorical canvass for appreciating the magnitude of the eco-devastation of Delta lands and waters. Using the orthographical criterion for sentence structure, the poem is a one-sentence text of eighteen lines and one hundred and twenty-five words. Though the sentence constitutes of several dependent clauses each bearing a unit of thought, there is cohesion in the thematic bonding of these aggregate of thoughts as advancing a common ecological message. Thus, the occurrence of a single period and the commonality of the ecological message advanced in the text provide discourse bonding and give the text a unitary structure. Pragmatically, each clause functions as a rank-shifted sentence decentered to a structure (of clause) lower than itself.

The eponymous preposition, “without (the trees)”, begins each orthographically set-off group of two lines termed stanza in the literary domain. “Without”, meaning “devoid of”, “not having”, “a lack or deprivation” (*Webster’s*) is iterated nine times in the text to foreground the ecological denials and deprivations that violate the Delta landscape. This is used in conjunction with terms that collocate in the ecological domain to realize the prepositional phrase structure and nominal paradigms that mark absences of life in the Delta: Without the (trees, evergreens, creeks, currents, sun, shrubs, forest, farms, stars). For

instance, “Without the trees (theme), the wind no longer gestures playfully with me” (rheme) (*Harmattan*, p.38).

Pragmatically, the backgrounding of the consequences of ecological destruction in the rhemic position is in fact a foregrounding device, for articulating these losses, the writer draws attention to their gains and underlines the need to resuscitate the conditions that had sustained such eco-harmony. Notice the transmutation of lives in the pragmatic ascription of animate qualities to these ecological habitats through selection rule violation. For instance, the wind selects *gestures playfully* to imbue its “blowing” or “howling” with positive affectation and life. Ordinarily, *wind*, as inanimate and abstract term, would miscollocate with such sensory terms as *gestures* and *playfully* in the semantic reading of notations. In the same reading of pragmatic notations through selection rule violation, flying fish *makes sorties* in soup, the sunbird *plays patiently*, the dew *delivers message* of dawn, the butterflies *indulge* in *colourful pageant*, the stars *show the way to congress of ancestors* (*Harmattan*, p.38; italics, our emphasis).

Stylometrically, there are one hundred and twenty-five lexemes, constituting of eighty- eight content words (all of which are generic environmental terms), and thirty-seven structural words. This word count translates to about seventy per cent of ecological lexical density, “lexical density being the proportion of lexical (i.e. content) words to total words in a text, usually expressed in percentage” (Bloor and Bloor, 2007, p.175). This lexical density marks the text as ecological discourse.

“For the Egbesu Boys” (*Harmattan*, pp.40-2) is panegyric. It constitutes of evocations and orate forms used to praise the Egbesu Boys, “young fighters struggling for resource control in the oil rich Bayelsa State, and Egbesu itself, “god of war among the Izon people of Nigeria” (Ojaide, 2007, p.62). Through the use of flyting or agonistic name-calling, the writer contrasts the heroic roles of the boys as against the destructive roles of the agents of ecocide couched in pejorative vocatives. The aim is equally to draw attention to the plight of Deltans and enlist support for the fight for resource control by articulating the highlights of ecological destruction in the Delta. Thus, on the one hand, terms of patronage are used to evoke Egbesu and the boys as call to positive action. God, steadfast faith, power, supreme warrior, warriors in self-defence, offspring keeping their heritage, devotees protecting their faith, marshal of the mangroves, war god of born fishers and farmers, great boys, true devotees, brave sons in honourable duty, holders of the ultimate weapon of justice, etcetera, are used to represent Egbesu and his boys.

These references contrast with negative terms used for multinational oil companies, government with surveillances-military agencies operating in the Delta: overlords, robbers, criminals, outlaws, mercenary army, trespassers, rapists, capital forces, coalition of global powers, killers, poaching army, occupying armada, etcetera. The use of the quasi command structure, “let + determiner + nominal + verbal+ object(s), common in traditional orate forms occur as parallel structures used to emphasize this support and foreground this call:

*Let the overlords call you obscene names, Let the benefactors of  
robbers vilify you Let their cohorts aim guns and grenades at you, Let  
them burn your villages and green, etc. Harmattan, p.40).*

This works in conjunction with rhetorical structures that implicate the logic for the angst reaction of the boys structured in an initial *wh-* word such as *what* and *who*: “*whobreaks* into your home to *kill* you/ draws from you all means of *self-defence*” (*Harmattan*, p.40).

In the above excerpt, *breaks* and *kill* are consecutives for offence, and *self-defence* its logic or defence. Note that “Egbesu Boys” in this context is an ameliorative evocation for militant activities in the Delta. Thus, the writer manipulates background knowledge and makes subtle references to the pejorative ascriptions of the militant activities (by government) through lexical explication as in “let the overlords call you *obscene names*” (italics, our emphasis). Similarly, “Egbesu Boys” as provincial Delta term co-occurs with Ogoni Youths, just as Egbesu is a kindred god with Iwri and Ifri, all of whose valour and protection the writer evokes and praises.

Note that the UrhoboIwri and its Izon equivalent Ifri all refer to the god of restitution and defence, just as Ogidigbo and Ozidi are legendary Urohobo and Izon warriors respectively. These provincial terms function with the use of personal footing, such as pronouns (I, we, our, my, mine, etc), and names of familiar Delta towns and historical events to effectively persuade the reader and involve him/her in this discourse of “faction”. The expressions “I call on you”, “I praise you” etcetera (*Harmattan*, p.41), are declaratives that function as explicit performatives common in orate and declamatory forms.

There is also the use of ecosophy or rhetorical logic to advance the Delta resolve to fight to protect their environment and resources. This is portrayed as statements of fact couched in declarative statements. Examples include: “those who bring a running fight to the iguana will lose their breath and withdraw before long” (*Harmattan*, p. 42); “One should not fear death and become a slave because slavery deprives one of life itself” (*Harmattan*, p. 42); “That is no life, without life” (*Harmattan*, p. 43), etcetera.

Notice the use of *those*, *one*, as indefinite pronouns that place the philosophical statements at a higher level of generality, and thus accord them universal application. The aim is to exhort the Delta warriors to key into this universal truth and sustain the fight as “Egbesu arms (them) with an arsenal of justice” (*Harmattan*, p. 42). The use of *arms* and *arsenal* collocates with other lexemes in the war domain to underline the raging ecological war in the Delta as well as the martial conflicts, and “multimilitant” activities in the area which has transformed into a theatre of war. Thus, retreats, aim guns and grenades, kill, marshal, capital forces, warrior spirit, triumph, multiple cavalries, blood, etcetera, are common war terms in the text. Note also the repetitive use of the strong negative modal form *cannot* +factive lexical verbs (drink, live) common in protest speech.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In sum, analysis of selected poems from Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan* shows a significant relationship between linguistic choices and the creation of environmental consciousness in the society. Ojaide as a socially committed writer, adopts various techniques of linguistic expression to communicate attitudes and emotions, and aspires to move the reader towards propagandist action. He uses adroit choice of lexical and structural expressions meant to achieve positive ecological consciousness in society, especially as it affects the environmental challenges caused by oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Ojaide creates environmental consciousness among the people of the Niger Delta area by sensitizing them towards their environmental rights and imbuing them with courage to protect (or even control) their ancestral resources. This militant propagandist action makes Ojaide an environmental rights activist. Thus, far from using arts (poetry) for art’s sake, Ojaide is an activist, a socially committed writer who uses literature for environmental witnessing and rights mobilization through adroit linguistic choices and discourse strategies.

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