Environmental Dereliction in Tanure Ojaide’s
*Delta Blues and Home Songs*

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ABSTRACT

Poetry, as a vital aesthetic property that evokes emotions and thoughts, play important roles in highlighting the disturbing determinants constantly militating against the beauty and pleasures of the environment. The foremost Nigerian poet, Tanure Ojaide is known for his reiterative exploration of these themes in his *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998). Ojaide’s concern in *Delta Blues* is on the environmental issues as they concern the people of the Niger Delta in particular and the ecosphere in general. This study, therefore examines the disturbing determinants constantly militating against the beauty and pleasure of the Niger Delta environment. More so, this paper will however be evaluating the poet’s (writer’s) preoccupation by adopting the eco-critical theory which sees art and the environment (society) as two interlocking entities that when studied will provide the beauty and emotion that are underneath. The study arrives at the finding that although a lot has been written on African literature, not much has been said of the Niger Delta. Hence, this paper identifies the fundamental systemic challenges that confront the Niger Delta people – their environment inclusive.

**Keywords:** Environmental issues, dereliction, ecosphere, theme, and systemic challenges
Introduction

“And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (King James Version, Gen. 6:5). The above quotation from the Holy Bible presents a picture of man’s wickedness that has been in existence from the time of Adam and Eve. One important fact that can be deduced here is that the writer is trying to depict a society filled with wickedness; man’s inhumanity to man is continually on the increase and the environment suffers the most. This is the case of the Niger Delta region – a people with abundant wealth below their earth crust, but little or nothing to show for it, and despite their (Niger Delta) resources being exploited on a daily basis, their environments are left in ruins and despoilment.

The reader should not misinterpret the position of the writer, Tanure Ojaide, as a mere emotional write-up, even as it is clear that issues of the environment attract more emotion than feminism. The point that is intended here is that, just as gender and feminist discourse can never be discussed or detached from the writer's emotion, environmental studies (ecocriticism) is another critical theory that has its root in the writer’s emotion. In the light of this, as this paper proceeds, the reader will be made to understand that environmental neglect and degradation cause pains and trauma to the inhabitants of the affected areas. What forms the background to this study basically is the acknowledgement that environmental neglect and exploitation falls within the framework of eco-criticism; hence we will be discussing Ojaide’s “Delta Blues” and “Home Songs” (1998) from this critical framework.

In Nigeria, oil was first discovered in Oloibiri in January 15, 1956 by Shell Darcy and later in other areas of the Niger Delta, Ogoni inclusive. Oloibiri is located in the present-day Bayelsa State, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, but many years later Oloibiri became a shadow of itself; both the government of Nigeria and the multinational oil companies totally abandoned and neglected the people to suffer in pains and trauma. This is the case of almost all the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta, be it Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers; they suffer underdevelopment amidst the abundance of resources located in their land. Ibaba quoting Obi reiterates it thus: “Paradoxically, however, the region is one of the least developed parts in the country” (Niger Delta: Constraints and Pathways, 1).

As Shell concentrated their exploration on the Ogoni land, they ended up polluting and contaminating their environment. In the early 1990s, oil exploration was put on hold as a result of the various oil spills in Ogoni land. Moreover, on different occasions, the natives of Ogoni land have consistently protested against the government. John Agbonifo puts it thus: “On 4 January 1993 about 300,000 Ogoni converged, under the auspices of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), to take part in an unprecedented protest march against the State and the Shell oil company” (240). This paper therefore will be focusing its
attention on the incidence that happened in Ogoni land as a result of the agitation struggle for a secured, peaceful and a serene environment by the Ogonis led by Saro-Wiwa and the ‘Ogoni eight’ which subsequently led to their execution by the Abacha regime.

The environmental denigration of the Ogoni land by Shell which necessitated the activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa and others and their eventual execution have always remained a source of trauma to the Ogoni people; trauma which is a product of collective memory is communal rather than individualistic, and according to Balaev, “Trauma causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness” (4). Trauma as a literary study gained prominence after the publication of Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Kali Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996). Trauma as a literary study has a close relationship with feminism and eco-criticism; this is so because it is a study that deals with the psychology of the people.

Having gone this far, it will be useful to provide some background study to eco-criticism. Accordingly, many writers and critics have provided some definitions to eco-criticism, but one that has come to be accepted is that of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm; they however defines it as “… the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment.” They further observed that “Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (xviii). Furthermore, M. H. Abrams summarises thus: “Eco-criticism … designates the critical writings which explores the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on the environment by human activities” (87).

Greg Gerrard goes ahead to quote Glotfelty thus:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of in modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (xix).

Eco-criticism as a literary theory is used for political corollary or to serve specific social interests. In the words of Garrard: “Eco-criticism is then, an avowedly political mode of analysis… Eco-critics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a ‘green’ moral and political agenda” (4), he moves on to emphasize that “eco-criticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural
theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology” (5).

Most of these writers who support the views of eco-criticism are notable for their activism and social criticism of the environment. Many have written to expose the sufferings and daily traumatic experiences which are end results of negligence by the government and Shell to treat and remedy the Niger Delta environments which have been contaminated by oil spills, and therefore the environment dereliction is what gave rise to the Niger Delta Literature which we study today. Ibaba on his part declares:

The literature on the Niger Delta has blamed the poor state of development on such factors as: inequality in oil wealth distribution due to the country’s centralized federalism, the politicization of revenue allocation and the resultant neglect of the region’s development; oil-induced environmental devastation, the resultant occupational displacement/dislocation and the failure to rebuild livelihood; the failure to corporate social responsibility on the part of the trans-national oil corporations… (2)

Tanure Ojaide, among many others, is one of the Niger Delta writers that focus his attention on the Niger Delta environment; his “Delta Blues and Home Songs” (1998) is one among his collection of poetry that focuses more on the Niger Delta environment. Tanure Ojaide (born 1948) is a seasoned Nigerian poet and writer. He is noted for his distinctive aesthetic vision and for his intense criticism of imperialism, religion, environmental neglect and other issues.

Though there abound lots of critical works by Tanure Ojaide, this paper will critically review “Delta Blues and Home Songs”. Like many poems on Niger Delta, “Delta Blues and Home Songs” focuses on the environmental decay of the Niger Delta region caused by oil spillage. Hence, Okome puts it this way: “Delta Blues and Home Songs (1997) is consistent with this aesthetic practice. As the title indicates the poetry book focuses on the Niger Delta as a landscape in which observable physical disintegration and decay in social life correlate” (195).

Meanwhile, in Alu’s words: “Ojaide’s Delta Blues and Home Songs present the Niger Delta as a landscape in which observable physical degeneration and rot in social life unite” (133). Nwagbara on his own part writes: “With the emergence of eco-poetry, Ojaide’s writings have come to be considered environmentally conscious texts; they adumbrate an internecine nexus between the natural world and man’s activities on it” (82). The remaining section of this paper will be devoted to the explication of “Delta Blues and Home Songs” which falls under ‘Trauma: The effects of Environmental Dereliction’ as a subtitle.
Trauma: The Effects of Environmental Dereliction

In *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, we are confronted with a situation where the poet makes a case for a better Niger Delta, where the government and the oil companies are to be held accountable for the deplorable state of the environment. The poetry collection (*Delta Blues and Home Songs*) is made up of two parts: part one, “Delta Blues”, has a total of 28 poems and part two, “Home Songs”, has 22 poems. Poems in both parts are inundated with images, irony, hyperbole, contrasts and other poetic devices that depict the pains and trauma the people of the Niger Delta are exposed to. In “When green was the lingua franca”, the poet (Ojaide) tries to present a picture of a society that has moved away from nature; serene, greenish, etc. environment to a society where both aquatic life and trees have been destroyed:

I see victims of arson
Wherever my restless soles
 take me to bear witness.
The Ethiope waterfront
wiped out by prospectors—
so many trees beheaded
and streams mortally poisoned
in the name of jobs and wealth!
(13)

In “Seasons”, Ojaide laments the deplorable condition of the Niger Delta, using local elementary psyched images of anguish, discomfort, and nervousness that streak his period and land. Stanza two is a good example:

No one doubts anymore the resolve of the season.
The plague from afar has slide in

From the above stanza, it is quite clear that Ojaide presents a people who have been betrayed by their nation and the oil company who came in disguise only to unleash mayhem on the people. The persona and his kinsmen are in a state of regret; they are suffering as a result of their express approval of the oil companies to operate on their land. He moves on to point out that the society no longer works as it should. The irony of the whole matter is that “when you call a thief a thief, he grins and sues” / “you for label—he knows the court are on sale;” / “police and lawyers wait on litigants in the hallways” / “like vultures overseeing a desolate country” (stanza 3: line 5-8).

Ojaide preserves the memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the other executed leaders; this he does by constantly reminding his readers of the murderous activities supervised by the military dictator, Sani Abacha on November 10, 1995. Ken and his colleagues were executed because of their environmental activism and their outspokenness against environmental dereliction caused by Shell. Particularly, in “Wails” and
“Immortal grief”, Ojaide refreshes his readers’ memories with the execution of Ken and the ‘other eight’. Each time the Ogonis, fans of Ken and environmental activists, remember the death of Ken they resort to grief and agony, and as such, the pains caused by Ken’s death can best be described as a source of communal trauma:

Another ANA meeting will be called and singers will gather I will look over and see a space that can take more than a hundred–the elephant never hides (17).

The memory of Ken as an “elephant” by his ANA colleagues is a basis for communal trauma; here he is being compared to an elephant, and the metaphor of strength comes to play, as the persona attributes the size and qualities of an elephant to Ken. Just as the absence of an elephant is greatly felt by other animals, Ken’s absence is felt by his colleagues after his execution. The pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering the roles Ken play in each of ANA meetings is further exemplified in lines 8-11 of stanza 1 of “Wails”: “Whether all the singers will come,” / “but that silent space” / “that can take more than a hundred” / “stares at me with nostalgia”.

The resultant effect of the pains caused by prolonged environmental neglect on the part of the government and oil companies is trauma. The worst of it is when it has to do with the death of acclaimed heroes of the community. “Immortal grief” is a dirge for Ken and his colleagues; in lines 10-12, the persona sings: “After presiding over the last primitive act of the century,” / “he still called out his livery to dance on nine mounds” / “as if human sacrifice to prolong his rule wasn’t enough” (20).

Pastoral trope is a key concern for “Delta Blues”; Ojaide uses it to explore the relationship between literature and the physical environment (biological environment). He goes on to highlight the devastating evil being wrought on the environment by human activities using these tropes. Irony, metaphor, metonymy, personification, euphemism, etc. are some of the tropes visible in the poem. Lines 6 and 7 of stanza 1 of “Delta Blues”: “The inheritance I sat on for centuries” / “now crushes my body and soul” speak volumes. Here, the persona laments how natural resources have turned to be weapons and sources of his suffering and bodily pains. “Those nine mounds woke” / “into another world, ghostly kings” - euphemism is in play in the above lines; the words are used to soften the message – an indirect way of saying that Ken and his eight compatriots died.

Conclusion
Poetry as an aesthetic property has been employed by many in the discussion of issues bordering on man and his physical environment. As such, it qualifies as an instrument for environmental discourse. In Nigeria for instance, literary writers, mostly those from the Niger Delta area have resorted to poetry as a convenient tool to expose the evil of man on the physical environment. Tanure Ojaide’s Delta Blues and Home Songs (1998) is a
collection that explores the themes of environmental dereliction. Looking at the collection, we are made to understand that every negative memories a people have about their adverse past experiences does not only cause them excruciating pains, but an unending trauma that is transferrable from one generation to another. The case of the Niger Delta people – the Ogonis in particular is a worthy example; as the memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni eight execution is very fresh in their mind.

_Delta Blues and Home Songs_ does not only expose the ills perpetrated by the government and the oil companies, it is also a poem that presents the Niger Delta region as a place that is “evergreen”, “stilted in mangroves”, serene environment, and good waters with all the aquatic life in good condition before the inception of oil exploration and other related activities by the government and multinational companies.

The damages caused by oil spillage cannot be over-emphasized; this is as its effect has gone beyond human comprehension; causing physical and emotional torture on the people. For instance, the constant death caused by bad and unhealthy intake of water as a result of oil spillage on both their waters and farmland is a good example. In summary, the act of abandonment and neglect from the multi-national oil companies and the government of the day can better be classified as complete wickedness of man to his fellow man and environment (i.e. environmental neglect).

**Works Cited**


The Holy Bible. King James Version. Genesis Chapter 6 Verses 5