

**THE LITERARY ENVIRONMENTALISTS: AN ECO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS
OF SELECTED POEMS OF NIYI OSUNDARE AND TANURE OJAIDE**

By

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Abstract

Literature is perceived as the production of a literary work or a body of written works produced in a particular language, country or age. It is conceptually viewed as a mirror of life or life itself as it is primarily concerned with all those things that deal with life. It is also considered as a portrait of man and his environment, held up for him to be seen by the artist, so that he can have profound reflections about his life, the world and that of the generation in which he belongs. Part of the components of life is the environment, which is a segment of nature. The literary environmentalist, as an eco-critic, is preoccupied with the study of nature and the environment. Eco-criticism perceives nature as the hub on which human being and its environment rotate. As a study that deals with the relationship between literature and the physical environment, eco-criticism usually adopts an earth-centred approach to literary studies. Eco-criticism views the earth as a natural aesthetic endowment with its values, (i.e. landscape – fertile and desert lands – seas, oceans and rivers, the green vegetation, mountains and rocks, valleys and highlands and other phenomena that constitute the environment); all of which contribute positively to man's existence and sustenance. It is a literary writing in which the eco-writer/poet delves into issues of environmental concern and particularly the effect of pollution on nature. Eco-criticism's major pre-occupation, as exemplified in the various writings of the eco-writers/poets/critics, is to condemn the atrocities usually perpetrated by man to nature, which, in the main, have penurious effects on the same man. The concern of the eco-writers/poets/critics corroborates Adie Edward's position that "the world's attention has been drawn towards the urgent need for the preservation of and maintenance of the environment as it is faced with the daunting phenomena called global warming and environmental degradation" (2019:18). In this paper, an eco-critical analysis of selected poems of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide is done, with a view to using their poems as a clarion call on government and other concerned agencies for necessary repair to the unjustifiable damage done, and are still being done to the Niger-Delta zone of Nigeria and other places negatively affected. The damage, which is of high magnitude and unquantifiable, is the major pre-occupation of the literary environmentalists. This

paper therefore posits that man should stop its maltreatment of nature. Nature should be treated as a phenomenon without which man's existence can be in jeopardy.

Keywords: Literature, Literary environmentalist, Eco-criticism, Nature, Eco-poetry

Introduction

The word *ecocriticism* is a blend of two words: ecology and criticism. In a simple term, ecology, which is a biological register, is defined by Hornby (2000) as the "relation of plants and living creatures to each other and to their environment, the [scientific] study of this". The above source also sees criticism as 'the work or activity of making fair, careful judgments about the good and bad qualities of something/somebody, especially books, music, etc. The term Ecocriticism was first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his work, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. By the 1990s, Ecocriticism has fully emerged with the publication of Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's joint collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996).

In his definition of Ecocriticism, Cheryl and Glotfelty (1996) see it as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment', while M.H. Abrams (1999) is of the opinion that Ecocriticism is 'a body of writings which explores the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities'. Wikipedia (2018) asserts that Ecocriticism is 'a study of literature and the environment'. From an interdisciplinary point of view, Wikipedia goes further to say that it is a study where literary scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature.

Environmental criticism, also known as ecocriticism or 'green' criticism, is a broad way for literary and cultural scholars to investigate the global ecological crisis in their various environment. Ecopoetry, which is a poetry with a strong ecological emphasis or message, has its major theme on ecology and focuses on humanities' relationship with the natural world. The Romantic poetry in general and William Wordsworth in particular, became the key icons of ecocritical studies in the good old days. Wordsworth was a major English Romantic poet, who has been considered as a forerunner of ecocritical studies with his view towards Nature and man's treatment of Nature. His fame lies in the general belief that he has been perceived as a Nature poet who views Nature as superior to humans, especially with his dictum of learning from the ants: "let nature be your teacher" (Woodrin, 1965; pg. 41).

In Nigeria, literary historians are accustomed to crediting Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide for being the leading light or champion of a new kind of poetry, a poetry fundamentally different both in theme and style from that of the preceding Soyinka and Bekederemo-Clark's generation. However, as some critics have argued, every age has a way of producing its own human medium through which it expresses its peculiar socio-

cultural problems. Accordingly, both Osundare and Ojaide arrive on the Literary scene at a time that shape and prepare them for the task of freeing up poetry from the prison-house of obscurity in which the earlier generation was said to have put it. The socio-cultural as well as historical background or context of Osundare and Ojaide's emergence – family, education, village/town setting, prevailing circumstance, to mention a few, have gone a long way in moulding and shaping them for the kind of poetry for which they have come to be known, namely: the poetry of ecology or environment.

This paper therefore intends to do an analysis of selected Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* poems. As the paper discusses the poems from a general overview, it does not intend to make use of any theory or limit itself to a particular aspect of criticism. It only discusses how the two literary giants use their poems to condemn man's inhumanity to Nature and the resultant effects on man and his environment.

Eco-Readings and Engagement in the Nigerian Context

Nigerian poetry in English language spans about six decades from its inception and has been a medium of engagement, decrying colonialism, cultural imperialism, socio-economic oppression and political tyranny (Nwagbara, 2008). In Nigerian poetry, there is often a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. What was observed and experienced in the natural environment is translated into oral forms like praise poetry, songs and chants, mostly in the accompaniment of musical instruments and audience participation in social gatherings like naming, marriages or religious functions. These oral forms were later translated into written forms with the introduction of writing. This medium of writing introduced a new form of literary agitation. The principal function of literature became that of protest as espoused in some drama, prose and poetry writings. Most recently however, eco-poetics has come to the fore. The mode of poetic enterprise, called resistance poetics which was popular among Nigerian poets has gradually taken the secondary seat. This is as a result of the current national awareness and consciousness of the realities of ecological imperialism in Nigeria – the question of environmental degradation – which has been brought to the attention of the world as foregrounded through eco-critical poetics.

According to Oyesola (1995), Niger Delta area is the economic base of Nigeria and it has witnessed one of the uncanny forms of neglect and marginalization – and yet 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings come from the area through oil exploration, exploitation and marketing by the multinational corporations. At the heart of the struggle for participatory environmental governance is the question of land control and preservation. That is why Mayowa (2001) feels that violence and ethnic agitation in Nigeria can be described from environmental and economic perspectives.

Eco-Poetics' major pre-occupation is on the consequences of the interplay of social politicking on the Nigerian natural environment, hence, following such a polluted socio-

economic landscape, Nigerian writers have risen to the occasion. They employ art to address, as well as, to bring to the knowledge of humanity this form of environmental exploitation. As environmentally conscious poets, both Osundare and Ojaide allow the social and economic facts within their individual environment to find expression in their arts. For example, in Osundare's eco-poetry, the poet shows that the earth (nature) signifies greenness, life and productivity, therefore, both mother-earth and natural laws demand that the wealth accruing from nature should be used for the advancement of the society. Whereas, the exploitative and destructive extraction of mineral resources (oil) in the Niger Delta area and the negative resultant effects of oil spillage, deadly gas flames, deforestation, toxic pollution of seas, rivers, farmlands and fish farms, appear to be the thematic concern of Ojaide in his eco-poetry.

Osundare as a 'Nature' poet: An Analysis of selected poems from *The Eye of The Earth*

*'Farmer-born, peasant bred, I encountered dawn in the enchanted
corridors of the forest, suckled on the delicate aroma of healing herbs,
and the pearly drops of generous moons. Living in those early days was
rugged, but barns brimmed with yams fattened by merciful rains and the
the tempering fire of the upland sun'*

(*'Preface' xiii*)

The above preface to the anthology *The Eye of the Earth* is Osundare's testimony of his interaction with the physical aspects of nature in the agrarian landscape of Ikere-Ekiti, a town in Ekiti State of Nigeria, where he was born and bred. Born in 1947, Osundare attended the University of Ibadan for his higher education. A believer in the right to free speech and in the power of words, Osundare has always been a vehement champion in his struggle to use arts for the benefit of mankind. He is renowned for his commitment to socially relevant art and artistic activism. In 1997, Osundare accepted a teaching and research post at the University of New Orleans, USA, having become a Professor in the University (Wikipedia, 2017) His works include: *Songs from the Market Place*, *Village Voice*, *The Eye of the Earth*, *Moon Songs*, *Songs of the Season*, *Waiting Laughters*, *Random Blues*, *The Word is an Egg*.

'Forest Echoes', the first poem of the anthology, relates the poet's experience while he strolls into the forest of *Ubo Abusoro*. The poet cannot hide his shock at the level of destruction done to the forest (trees) by the plank merchants (Agbegilodo) who have deforested the land in a bid to enrich themselves. The poet remembers how in the past the forest accommodates the palm-wine tree that serves as "conqueror of rainless seasons/mother of nuts and kernels/bearer of wine and life". The forest also houses "a bevy of birds/a barrack of beasts/and a school of truant antelopes" that become easy prey for the custodians of the forest (hunters) thereby becoming a life-sustenance source for the land dwellers. Appreciating nature and the dwellers of the forest, Osundare

remembers the partridge with its 'skyful guffaw' which is a triumphant mockery of a missing shot from a hunter, the weaver bird and squirrel, all join in the chorus, while the chameleon dazzles the forest with its garment of a 'million mirrors'. So also is the praying mantis wringing its green hands before an absent god in prayer. The termites, snakes and monkeys who are also occupants of the forest are all present in the orgy of joy. All the above are memories of the poets and as the reader progresses to the end of the poem, and as stated by Osundare in 'The Preface', looking back may also mean looking forward, especially for the visionary artist, because, he is not just a person who remembers things but also a reminder.

In "Forest Echoes" therefore, Osundare depicts man, the land, animals, plants (in fact, all natural phenomena) interacting and celebrating in one festive moon at that time of universal productivity. Though set in the past, it is meant to enhance our understanding of the present. Nature in the poem is seen as an instrument for survival, sustenance and a galvanizing agent of the occupants of land, hence, deforestation of the land is not only injurious but also deadly to the dwellers.

In "Let Earth Pain be soothed", Osundare evokes a world after the capitalist plunder and despoliation of the earth, its resources and its ecological balance. Nature is angry with man for the despoliation. As a result, the skies have refused to send down its 'liquid treasure' (rain). Consequently, there is drought, hunger and famine in the land, as seen from the excerpt below:

*The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst
Dust
dust in brewing kitchens
dust in retrenching factories
dust in power brothels
The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst
The roofs have been silent too long
The seeds noiseless in the dormitory of the soil
the earth has been lying too long
and songless. (Osundare, The Eye of The Earth, 28)*

As a result of the destruction of the ozone layers, the sky is angry. The absence of rain (a nature's gift to mankind) results to dust filling up everywhere; in the kitchens, bedrooms, factories, brothels while the roofs have been coloured by dust. The catastrophic effect of Nature's anger also extends to the refusal of seeds planted in the earth not germinating, thus resulting into famine and hunger. The use of various metaphorical devices foregrounds meaning in the poem. However, the underlying meaning in the theme is

anger and disorder in nature while its moral is that the danger posed by man to society through greed and exploitation is also carried out on a grandier scale in the despoliation of the earth. In the profoundest sense therefore, man is endangered as much as nature itself is threatened.

A critical look at the graphological pattern drawn by Osundare in 'Our Earth will not Die', reveals how imagistic ideas and symbolic impression about the damage and the harm that people cause to the earth are illuminated through the exploration of the linear distribution of lines across each stanza. The first and the second stanzas have a zig-zag structural pattern which conforms to the meaning conveyed by Osundare to his audience. This is epitomized thus:

Lynched
the lakes
slaughtered
the sea
mauled
the mountains
But our earth will not die
Here
There
Everywhere
A lake is killed by the arsenic urine.
(Our Earth will not die)

As it were, the poet explains the harmful things that are done the earth, such as *lynching*, *mauling* and *slaughtering*. These events are capable of causing disorder and pandemonium, physical and psychological damage to mankind. The use of enjambment (run-on-lines) as a literary device further suggests how elongated and prolonged the torment and harm waged upon the earth. While the unequal lines depict the inequality in human perspectives and consideration towards earth, the three ecological landscapes of *lakes*, *seas*, and *mountains* represent the nooks and crannies of the earth, whose natural substances and phenomena are being despised by man everyday. Osundare therefore uses the first part of the poem to address the havoc, hazard and evil perpetrated by people upon the earth, thus making it mournful, sad and melancholic. The last three penultimate lines of the final stanza of the poem:

Fishes have died in the waters
Birds have died on the trees
Rabbits have died in their burrows

depict that the creatures which occupy the earth have been *lynched*, *mauled*, and *slaughtered* by people who ordinarily are expected to preserve them for their own

sustenance. The implication of the foregoing is that every creature within the nook and crannies of the world and Nigeria in particular, has been unjustifiably terrified and harmed by human race. The fishes which represent the aquatic animal, the birds which serve as the icon for the arboreal animals and the rabbits that symbolize the terrestrial animals are all affected by man's inhumanity to nature.

In the poem, 'First Rain', Osundare painstakingly expresses the aesthetics of nature. Just as nature has been angry with man for the despoliation as presented in 'Let Earth's Pain be soothed', the good and beauty of nature is seen through nature's responses in 'First Rain'. There is a juxtaposition of good and evil in the poem: when it rains, there is joy and peace because the earth will send forth its fruits. There will be greenness of tree leaves and grasses, freshness in man's appearance while air blown will 'soothe the pain' when there is rain. On the other hand however, the effect of drought is pain and suffering for mankind and nature. The contrast is depicted in the 'First Rain' through the following lines:

*a tingling tang awakes the nose
when the first rain has just clipped
the wing of the haughty dust
a cooling warmth embraces
our searching soles
as the land vapour rises
like a bootless infantry
and
through her liberated pores
our earth breathes again
(The Eye of the Earth, 29)*

In the poem, Osundare exhibits his poetic prowess and brilliancy in taking his readers through a belief in cosmogony or cosmology where the cosmic marriage between the Heaven and Earth has yielded a fruitful harvest, (that is, rain) to alleviate the suffering of nature and mankind. Invariably, the first rain has brought relief and 'our earth breathes again', resulting in hope and joy. The poem is one of Osundare's clearest celebrations of earth as provider, giver and protector that should be revered by man.

*The rain has robed the earth
in vests of verdure
the rain has robed on earth
licked clean by the fiery tongue of drought
with these green guests around
who says that drought was here?*

After the rain, there is no drought again, famine has ended. The rain has brought with it abundant food to nourish body and soul, it has arrived with fertility and a bumper harvest, as espoused by the poet in 'Rain-coming':

*the early rains ring the bell
and the earth springs green
from the sleep of broom [...]
the rain unties the farmer's tongue
bursting famine yawns
into barns of liling yams
plums and pumpkins
dense with drink and daring
rolling juicily from furrow and furrow
(The Eye of The Earth, 30)*

A one-time farmer, who has almost been abandoned by the wife, children and possibly villagers for being unproductive and whose 'tongue has been tied' as a result of drought but now 'the rain unties' can now breathe a sigh of relief. The poem appears to be a reminiscence of 'Forest Echoes' where the poet states that:

*The rains have kept their time this year
(Earth has [finally] won the love of the sky)
Trees both with backward sap
and leaves grab a deepening green
from the scanty sun.
(The Eye of the Earth, 3)*

The reader needs not be told that rain has been accorded much more recognition than any other phenomenon that sustains nature. Rain is the agent of the difference between plenty and scarcity, abundance and famine, joy and pain, life and death. Osundare no doubt confers a god-like status on rain in the poem, hence, it has become a double-edged sword-when available, it can make; when not available, it can mar.

Going through his work, one is convinced to say that the triumph of Osundare's poetry and his new breed compatriots are most likely borne out of necessity rather than envy. The usual use of domesticated language brings him closer to the masses. It also makes his poems assume a distinct anti-imperialist tone. This observation is subsequently crystallized in the famous essay by Funsho Aiyejina as cited by Abdu (2003) that Osundare is the most prolific of the lot, whose poetry epitomizes the distinctiveness of the group's new style. In concluding this part, *The Eye of the Earth* can be said to be a very special anthology of poems fashioned on Osundare's perception of man and nature.

The image of the poet in the anthology is more than an interpreter of a complex and rich tradition of his people who share a common philosophy. The poet celebrates the work culture of his people with special emphasis on their reverence for nature, defending the traditional myth on which the community lives together resisting collision. The volume is seen as one of the fiercest indictments of modern economic culture of the people and alien destructive forces. It chronicles a pictorial account of aggression of man on the earth, which is the poet's personal contribution to solving the problem of erosion and desertification of his area.

Ojaide's Eco-Poetry: An Analysis of selected poems in *The Tale of the Harmattan*

Background to Ojaide's eco-poetry

The problem of spills, deliberate destruction of the mangrove to pave way for pipelines, disappearance of the aqua-life (due to oil pills) and the frequent movement of heavy ships etc; are common occurrences in the Niger Delta. With the rate of degradation, the region has suffered a lot of loss of its habitable terrain and the experiences of the people can best be described as the tragedy of exploitation and political avarice.

Niger Delta communities have expressed discontent and ventilated their grievances through political and constitutional means against the marginalization and environmental abuses of their soil and water from the time of independence (The News, 2006). Their agitation had resulted into loss of lives of some of their leaders – Isaac Adaka Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa (who was killed during the Sani Abacha regime) They had decried the environmental degradation in the Niger delta area. As a result of government's non-challance, the people, particularly from 1990s, had become more restive and violent in their protests against the activities of foreign oil companies, notably Royal-Dutch Shell (Shell Petroleum Development Company). Their grievances have focused on the deteriorating conditions of life brought about by air and water pollution, land degradation and the socio-economic impact of oil exploration on local communities. The 1990s witnessed an outburst of violence against transnational oil corporations and the seeming government 'conspiracy' with them. And as Agbese (2002) notes, the use of one ethnic group against another bred grave intra and inter ethnic hostilities, while Ikpat (2001), also asserts that government's complicity in the crisis found manifestation in the deployment of heavily armed military personnel to guard oil facilities, operations and expatriates. In addition, oil companies have had to recruit jobless local youths to watch over oil interests, thus setting local people against themselves. The official reason given however, was that the presence of heavy security would act as deterrence to aggressive communities from destroying oil installations. The rationale behind this was controversial as it also showed insensitivity to the fundamental causation of the persistent conflict: namely, abjection, denial and maltreatment.

Analysis of Selected Ojaide's Poetry

Tanure Ojaide has always been considered as the most prolific nature poet from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. A poet by training and a priest by birth, (every first born male child of Urhobo is traditionally a priest (Onookome, 2002). Tanure himself reports that he started his childhood and formative life with his grandmother, uncles and elders in his community where there is abundance of orature – folklore, folktales, songs, chants, dances, proverbs and varieties of traditional ceremonies – that are taken seriously in practice and with all the reverence attached to them and whose custodians are majorly the old and the aged. Ojaide can therefore be called a historian, a singer, a dramatist, a rural and traditional man. Having grown up and equipped himself with the history and idiosyncrasies of a rural setting, coupled with his formal education in various world literatures, Ojaide can then be regarded as a man versed both in written and oral traditions of literature.

Tenure Ojaide was born to Urhobo parents in 1948. A Nigerian poet and an academic, Ojaide is a powerful writer usually noted for his intense and vehement criticism of imperialism, religion, politics and other issues. He is regarded as a social-political and an ecocentric poet. He taught at the University of Maiduguri before being appointed a Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA. (Wikipedia, 2017). Ojaide's collections include *Labyrinths of the Delta*, *Day dream of Ants and other Poem*, *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, *The Blood Peace and other Poems*, *When It No Longer Matters where You Live*, *Tale of the Harmattan* and *Waiting for the Hatching of the Cockerel*.

'*Tale of the Harmattan*' consists of protest poems that Ojaide uses as an avenue to decry the atrocities perpetrated in the Niger Delta area. The area has been devastated, polluted and the people subjected to a lot of hardship through the activities of oil companies who have been there for oil exploration and exploitation. Since oil has been discovered in the area in 1956, the area has witnessed a lot of environmental pollution through oil spillage, gas flaring and destruction of their aquatic and terrestrial sea and land areas. The people are daily facing the problem of survival; they hardly have access to good food, stable power supply and good drinking water since their water has been polluted with toxic chemicals. Heavy equipment has also contributed in damaging their roads thus leaving them without good motorable roads. These ecological challenges in form of environmental degradation, exploitation, intra and inter-ethnic crises, government's insensitivity and connivance of community leaders with powers-that-be have all culminated into Ojaide's preoccupation in his eco-poetry.

In The Goat Song (Harmattan, 9), the goat is personified as it uses the language of man, since only human beings can sing. The poet deliberately deviates from linguistic rules to apply appropriate dictions to depict the situation which is beyond horror in the Delta

region. The 'cry' of people in the region is continuous as the goat bleats (sings) without being attended to. Thus the lines:

*I sing the community's goat song/
I sing the peoples goat song/
I sing the land's goat song (Harmattan, 10)*

are attestation to the fact that the suffering and anguish prevalent in the Niger-Delta region are not limited to the land alone but to people and the entire community, including animate and inanimate things. The devastation of the area is so colossal that virtually everything is negatively affected with little or no hope that normalcy will ever return. The poet uses various metaphors to describe the gory situation which is not only about "folks who wear gold over tumours of hope"/"round into a guarded prison"/"south-south of the mountain palace", a place where "those sitting on wealth are rickety", "groveling on sand", with "globules of anguish their only share". Tanure describes his people under such situation as people "who wear smiles over deep wounds", even including "the dead heroes incinerated with flares" (Harmattan, 9-10). The song of that goat portends danger as it is now about the "blackened stream and ancestral blood" being shipped away as "the wind that laments as its fans burn out" with "the trees that have been shaved of their coiffures by the scorching fire from flares" including "snake sliding closer to the heart". These are ominous signs of grief, despair and disintegration of one-time cohesive community. The environmental pollution of the Niger-Delta region transcends mere illusion, it is indeed a reality that cannot be easily forgotten. Tanure craftily uses powerful words that connote physical and traumatic pains experienced by the people of the Delta area in such words as: *anguish, prison, rickety, groveling, globules of anguish, dead bodies incinerated with flares, deep wounds, rusty colouration from the wells, etc*; to describe the Niger-Delta ecological scenario. It is disheartening that while the Niger-Delta area remains in perpetual "blackout", the Deltans' "ancestral blood" is carted away to illuminate certain other places. The "iroko's fall, game leave in droves, and humans flee to hunger" (Harmattan, 10) are words meant to show the magnitude of the devastation, which includes majorly the lack of good things of life conspicuously noticed in the region. In the poem, the evocation of the spirits of Delta fallen heroes as 'in self-defense, Saro-Wiwa exhorts foot soldiers' and those of their ancestors such as "Ozidi will not forgive the insult" (Harmattan, 10) is a clear indication that the poet believes in the spiritual intervention of both the fallen heroes and their ancestors to solve the Niger-Delta imbroglio.

Tanure in the poem, "*Priests converts and gods* (Harmattan, 12) expresses his displeasure and discomfort of the role played by religious priests in adding to the ecological problems of the Niger-Delta region. Instead for the "Pentecostal converts"/"born-again animals" (Harmattan, 12) to condemn the atrocities that have been perpetrated by the multinational oil companies, who with "government and the

coalition of global lords/have snatched away what ancestors sat upon” (Harmattan, 11) they engage in violating the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the people. Apart from that, “Pentecostal converts burnt down the primeval grove/there they believe witches metamorphosed into owls/they had become, /when they were born again, living in self-renunciation” (Harmattan, 12). The Pentecostal converts burning down of ancestors’ grove is not a primary assignment of the converts, rather, converting other people is a matter of pacifying and convincing them and not destroying or attempting to destroy people’s culture. To the poet, this is adding insult to the injury already on ground and the result of such action can be catastrophic if the situation is not well managed. Tanure’s use of words, such as, *burnt down, trashed, felled, besieged land, inferno, hell, victims, boiling oil so combustible*, (Harmattan, 12-13) to describe the ecological situation in the Niger-Delta area, is an attempt by the poet to draw attention to the helplessness of the people in the face of the devastation of their land and the level of tyranny displayed. To the poet, the Pentecostal converts have only come “to kill” both the physical and spiritual lives of the people and not to spread any gospel. The people need not be told of any hell as they already have the feeling that there is no other hell than the Niger-Delta area where “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, 13). In the mind of the poet, the people should stand by what they believe in (Cultural values and ethics, reverence of their gods and collective determination to speak with one voice) and shun foreign doctrines and the negative influences which appear to be mere distractions.

In the poem “*Womb-wrapped*” (Harmattan, 15-16), the poet’s nostalgic feeling of the past Delta where there used to be peace and tranquility, harmony and commitment is compared with the present Delta, where there is violence, destruction and death. The “womb” represents the beautiful natural past of the Delta as found in the “boundless bounty”, full of happiness and songs. Therefore the “forest of birdsong after birdsongs”, “chorus from the minstrel mingling with birdsongs”, “the sea litters the sea’s spirits”, “crowd of human mingling with a cloud of talkative birds to welcome the newly born”, “Mami Wata (which) smiles to herself in her bed of coral”, etc; (Harmattan, 15-16), all united with nature during the period before the discovery of oil, when the stream was “herb-dark”. But as soon as oil was discovered, when “oil blowouts closer and closer”, those facilities and amenities that are to contribute to survival in the region become damaged, then destruction, devastation and death become daily occurrence as here stated:

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 preordained

12

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

13

Wearing shell-coated gear;
The arsonist escapes finger printing
(Harmattan, 15-16)

With his use of powerful metaphors and words to express the magnitude of damage done to the landscape, especially the forest reserves, such as, *shrinks snaking oil slick, drum-carving trees, heart-throbs, mortal fear of fire, arsonist, ambushed, fuming forest forages*, Ojaide draws the reader's attention to the unabated destruction, violence and death, that have become the order of the day in the region. The "fire", "burning", and "scorching", are the result of the gas flaring and the devastation that accompanies it in the Delta region. The poet's reference to the "Mami Wata" smiling to herself in "her palace of corals" depicts the one-time peaceful co-existence between man on land and animals or fishes in the rivers or sea. The Delta region in the past is presented by the poet as a place with green vegetation where animate and inanimate things live in peace and harmony, devoid of rancour and acrimony. Whereas, the "resilient spirit of the reed in the tide", "drowned in oil slush", "the change map of the homeland", "the forests and rivers blotted out", "the Apipia that cries hysterically", "palm trees burnt out by spills and flares", "homes turned to wilted dominion" and where "evergreens bald" and the "soil one barren crust" (Harmatta, 18), are the major features of the new Niger-Delta region. And as noted by Onyema and Onyema (2018), the poet has only employed 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. Hence the use of expressions that mark displacement and tactile metaphors, are used by the poet to signify the shift between the old Delta of peace and the new Delta of pollution and violence.

In "*For my grandchildren*" poem (Harmattan, 22) Ojaide expresses a deep feeling of a bleak and unsure future for that group of people in the region. Grandchildren are expected to be the future generation out of who would be leaders of the immediate society, the community at large or even the Nigerian nation. What will they be left with when their land has already been devastated? That appears to be the agitation of the poet. At a tender age when they are supposed to enjoy, they have been abandoned and denied those good things of life as a result of the devastation of their land. Children can no longer "fish or tap rubber", as the poet himself once did. The poem is a pathetic one

considering the future of Niger-Delta children and grandchildren, it is a case of suffering in the midst of plenty.

In the poem “For the Egbesu Boys” (Harmattan, 40-42), the poet praises the efforts of Egbesu Boys for their fight in ensuring resource control of oil both in Bayelsa State and Egbesu itself. They are a group of young boys fighting to control the resources accruable from oil through equity and fair play. The poet sees them as heroes who selflessly fight for the right of their land as against agents of destruction such as government, some selfish community leaders, the oil corporations and even the armed personnel sent to coerce them into submission. Despite the fact that the boys are being threatened, killed and maimed, the poet encourages them not to relent in their bid to liberate their land and people, as he says:

*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, 40)*

The poet therefore calls on all and sundry to support the boys both morally and financially and encourage them, so that the objectives of their fight can be achieved. The poet wants the whole world to see the boys as fighting a just course and should not be seen as rebels. In the bid to do this, the poet does not mince words in christening them as “warriors in self-defense”, “great boys”, “true devotees”, “brave sons in honourable duty”, “holders of the ultimate weapon of justice”, to drive home his point. The poet equates the activities of Egbesu Boys to those of Ogoni Youths as Egbesu is a god with Iviwri and Ifri, all of who are progenitors of the Niger-Delta region, as Ogidigbo and Ozidi are powerful ancestors of Urhobo and Izon. The poet allays the fears of the Egbesu Boys as he encourages them and praises their efforts. With such statements as “I call on you”, “I praise you” (Harmattan, 41), “those who bring a running fight to the iguana will lose their breath and withdraw before long”, “One should not fear death and become a slave because slavery deprives one of life itself” (Harmattan, 42) and “That is no life, without life” (Harmattan, 43) the poet believes that the Egbesu Boys are the last hope of the Niger-Delta area owners in freeing themselves from the shackles of the oppressors and the overlords.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated in this paper that Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, in their poems, are literary environmentalists whose works cannot be brushed aside. Their works have shown in no small measure that they are literary activities who believe that life can

be worth living when situations are normal. For vehemently condemning the atrocities of man to nature, both have shown that they care for the welfare of nature without which man's existence can be in jeopardy. Lampooning the obscurity in the poems of poets like Soyinka and his peers, which more often than not, scares readers, Biodun Jeyifo, one of Soyinka's unrepentant critics says:

For while the older poets generally deployed a diction and a metaphoric, highly allusive universe, calculated coterie of specialists, the new poets [i.e. Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide and others] have taken the language of poetry, the diction of figurative expression, to the market place, to the popular daily press. (Jeyifo 1983, cited in Anyokwu, 2016)

Both Osundare and Ojaide have proved that poetry need not be obscure and this is why the two poets are being highly rated today. The messages in their eco-poetry are clear, direct and understandable.

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