

African Cultural Spatiality and the Ecocritical Praxis: An Insight into Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*

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Abstract

When one reads through the critical opinions of many Anglo-American ecocritics on the ecocritical praxis, one who knows nothing about Africa and the vigorous struggle against environmental and ecological degradation would conclude that ecocriticism is the exclusive literary practice of the West. This is a problem, because, though subject to and often affected by cultural demands, practices as well as world view, ecocriticism is a global practice, predicated on the modern environmental crises that have continued to raise serious concerns among men of differing cultures. Using the analytical method, and the ecocritical theory as framework, this paper establishes the ecocritical praxis as 'a familiar bedfellow' in African literature, exploring the extent of the presence of the ecocritical tradition in African literary canon, using Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* as a paradigmatic example. It is discovered that African writers, especially as evident in

the aforementioned text, use their works to agitate against environmental degradation and despoliation, with the sole aim of recuing it from further damage. It is concluded that though, ecocriticism started in the western world, it has spread across the globe, including Africa, where it has come to gain so much acceptability, following the growing unease over environmental degradation on the continent.

Keywords: African, cultural spatiality, praxis, ecocriticism, Anglo-American

Introduction

The way ecocritical practice is perceived by Western critics, categorically establishes it as an exclusively Western literary engagement. It thereby cuts off the entire African continent and the advocates of this literary practice from the global struggle against the ecological question. But the universal truth about ecocriticism is that, it is a practice that sweeps through continents of the modern world. This is following the growing environmental damage that tends to propel man and his environment speedily to a catastrophic end, and which demands urgent attention. While it is true that there is a subtle variance in the degree to which critics engage in ecocriticism across cultures, no culture in modern times can be cut off from the vigorous struggle against global ecological crises. This is because there is hardly any society that has not seen industrialization nay modernity with their large-scale negative effects on the natural environment and ecology. This paper, therefore, examines the ecocritical praxis within the African cultural space, establishing the fact that, like western observers, Africans are worried about their environment and how it can be rescued from further despoliation, thus defining them as ecocritics, and ecocriticism as a global practice.

Ecocriticism in African Literature: A Critique

According to Aswin Prasanth,

African writers are in a “state of nature,” in perfect harmony with environment. Their literature has therefore a rural orientation on the one hand and despise of urban background on the other. There is an inherent longing for lost rustic serenity in African literatures. In African literatures, the celebration of nature and wildness is more dynamic than in any other literatures. This celebration is part of community life. African communities have close relationship with nature and conservation ecology is part of everyday practice. Writers like Amos Tutuola, Camara Laye, Mongo Bette, Ferdinand Oyono, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Alan Panton, Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Ama Ata Aidoo and J.M. Coetzee have attempted to demonstrate these facts through their works (59).

The above assertion is obviously true considering the affinity the traditional African man had with his natural environment, before the advent of colonialism. This relationship is captured by Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, where we see the natives struggling against the white settlers in an attempt to rescue their natural environment from desecration. Before the term Ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in 1978, African writers had already started decrying the rape of their natural environment, by foreigners. For instance, “Okara's poem “Piano and Drums” is a subtle nostalgia of the primal life of Africa before foreign intervention, and the exploitation of Africa's natural environment” (Ayinuola 42). He also adds that, “The Fisherman's Invocation” and “The Call of River Nun” are poems that have a leaning towards the purity of the natural environment of the Niger Delta before the negative effects of oil exploration” (31).

In a similar way, Sikiru Adeyemi Ogundokun interprets John Pepper Clark's poem “Night Rain” as an eco-poem following the fact that it reveals the intrinsic relationship between literature and the environment, and the representation of nature, which constitute the environment in a literary work. All this points to the fact that environmentalism had always found great expression in African literary studies, before Rueckert finally used the term ecocriticism to delineate the relationship between literature and ecology. In fact, in Africa, there had been a communion between man and his ecological space, and that relationship was maintained until Western capitalists violated African spatiality, fabricated social spaces, and broke that sweet bond, with their cruel activities on the virgin land of Africa. These excesses are what they refer to as modernization, which, in itself, is a phenomenon of self-negation. This modernisation fails to recognize that there exists an inseparable tie between man and his natural environment as against the African's belief that, “the survival of man is entirely tied to his environment (Ogundokun 25).

From the above explication, one can affirm that Emily Potter's supposition about ecocriticism, where she seems to restrict ecocritical studies exclusively to Western literary canon, seems racially affected in a way. In her words:

Literature and the environment as a socio-political issue are of course familiar bedfellows in western literature, and their relationship in the latter part of the twentieth century appeared promising to literary critics, in a context of increasing public discourse on ecological shifts and environmental horrors (2).

If, however, Potter's claim with regard to the mutual exclusivity of ecocriticism is to be taken seriously, it must be from the angle that modernisation, – the cradle of the global environmental problems plaguing man today– originates in the West. Potter's assumption must be reacted to through the post-colonial critical prism, following his failure

to take into cognizance the rich exposition of the African environment in African literature. As evident in African literature, African writers are cognizant of the endemic pollution, environmental degradation and other ecological problems that are currently ravaging the world— Africa not excluded, hence their environmental agitations. In their quest towards rescuing and conserving the ecological space, we see writers' unwavering literary and even non-literary environmentalism in Africa.

In pre-colonial Africa, man had great respect for his environment, and would not mistreat it for any reason following “traditional African ethical view”. Chuka Albert Okoye is of the opinion that this ethical view presupposes that

...nature has its respect which must be accorded it lest man is bound to suffer for it. Thus, despite the fact that man is at the center of the ethical system, he does not have a monopoly of it. Man seeks to preserve his environment according to the traditional African system not just for himself but for the future generation and in honor of the tradition (reference to ancestors and worship). The African traditional system is replete with this weak anthropocentrism following their belief that man is a keeper of nature not a master to it (143-144).

Since African traditional system had deep-seated roots in weak anthropocentrism, the pre-colonial African regarded his environment with utmost respect and treated it with caution, because any harm done to the environment is invariably harm done to man. But the case varied largely upon the intrusion of the civilisers, the 'enlightenment' missionaries and the eventual colonisers, who failed to acknowledge any intrinsic nexus between man and his environment. In western societies, anthropocentrism takes centre stage, and their values are constructed from this position. This is why they keep engaging in debates on whether or not nature has an autonomous existence as distinct from that of man. Byron Caminero-Santangelo tells us thus “Anglo-American ecocriticism frequently embraces the ethical position that humans need to do away with “anthropocentrism” by rejecting the

nature-culture dualism which objectifies nature and places the category of culture/humanity at the center of things” (699). In Africa, this is not a subject for debate, because while they may obviously have autonomous existence, they remain intertwined, hence, interdependent on each other, burying therefore the binary idea of superiority and inferiority. This is the mind-set of the African, which sets him worlds apart from his western counterpart. Thus, in African literary ecology, the ecocritic may not set out to answer the same pressing questions that western literary ecological critics bother themselves with. African ecocritics simply struggle to conscientise the people on the need to rekindle their severed relationship with their natural environment, so that man, like a prodigal, would return to bygone days, and begin to enjoy the fullness of nature he once enjoyed. So, Jonathan Bate's revelation of what constitutes a critical discourse in western literary ecology—“A central question in environmental ethics is whether to regard humankind as part of nature or apart from nature”(8)— is of less relevance in African literary ecology. However, the African ecocritic, in his enterprise, also bothers himself with the question: “what is the place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling?” (8). This remains an essential meeting point between the African ecocritical scholar and his Western counterpart.

Generally, ecocritics “lay emphasis on the preservation of landscape in order to save the human race”(Fenn 114). He adds that, “Ecocriticism not only lays emphasis on the 'harmony' of humanity and nature but also talks about the destruction caused to nature by the changes which take place in the modern world for most of which man is directly responsible” (Fenn 114). This constitutes the ultimate focus of African literary ecologists. They recognise that things have changed greatly, especially negatively, and they remain perturbed by the current state of their natural environment. This worrisome state is often located in modernisation and the gross expansion of global capitalism whose strength springs from modernisation itself.

There is no doubt about the extent to which modernisation has powered the expansive energies of global capitalist values and practices. So, the African writer now has an environmentalist role to play to help in saving both man and the natural environment, from total destruction because he knows that the death of the natural environment would invariably toll the demise of the entire humanity.

In Africa, the quest for environmental justice is the commonest engagement of literary writers of today, and this “Environmental Justice reflects justice not only in human communities but also towards other species, ecosystems, landscapes, and the environment as a whole” (Sahu 548). In the Niger-Delta landscape, writers struggle to avert the harsh realities of “Acid rain” which “acidifies their lakes and streams and damages their vegetation.” This is done by conscientizing the people on the likely damage gas flaring and bombing of oil pipelines have on human beings, the atmosphere, and the entire human and animal environment. The creative writer, like the non-literary writer and other environmental activists, share the revolutionary vision of the group Friends of the Earth Nigeria, as captured by Godwin Uyi Ojo and Nosa Tokunbor, who state thus:

Our vision is of a peaceful and sustainable world based on societies living in harmony with nature. We envision a society of interdependent people living in dignity, wholeness and fulfilment in which equity and human and peoples' rights are realised. This will be a society built upon peoples' sovereignty and participation (8).

From every indication, “The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity have only recently caught the attention of the writers” (Fenn 115). Fenn's assertion is true to some extent but certainly not in its entirety, especially in the African context. This is so because

Africans have always been aware of the environmental problem with which they have been faced. They knew this fact from the epoch of the colonising force, and they started writing about it when they developed the knack to reduce their creative imagination to paper. This cry has continued to be heard. For the above reason, Fenn's claim would be much more appropriate if it declares that there has recently being a tremendous increase in literary works expressing solidarity with nature, and the growing havoc being done to our environment and its repercussion on man. That way, Fenn would simply have expressed an outstanding opinion on literary ecological studies in contemporary times.

Another assertion worth responding to is the one by William Slaymaker. Though an African literary critic, Slaymaker does not seem to be correct in his investigation of African writers' engagement with ecological or environmental issues. He declares that:

General anthologies, review, and summaries of black African literary and critical practices from the late 1980s through the 1990s bear out the thesis that global ecocritical responses to what is happening to the earth have had an almost imperceptible African echo. Books that deal with black African criticism and literary theory rarely take up environmental or ecological topics (689).

It could be true that, 'critical practices' in Africa have not responded ecocritically to the issues as stated above. But we refuse to accept, predicated on the evidence seen in the works of earlier writers, the assumption that 'literary practices' expressed virtually no concern for the plaguing global environmental and ecological crisis. Obviously, the reason why critical scholars could not respond to these environmental challenges is because the critical tool called ecocriticism had not been coined. But they, however, condemned the damage being done to the earth. Wole Soyinka's *SwampDwellers*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Once are not Born*, Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, in addition to the ones mentioned early on, also explore the

theme of nature, environmental pollution and degradation. And these literary works are a product of the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. Truly, there might not have been the preponderance of creative works exploring the degradation of the earth in earlier decades, but there were still works that responded vigorously to the issue. The only factor that delayed the expansive exploration of environmental or ecological criticism is the absence of a generic theory. That is, a theory that categorically underpins ecological issues, (and like Marxism would reveal class struggle and the mode of production, and how it affects concrete history), uncovers the hidden elements of ecologism in any given literary text. Thus, if ecocriticism as a modern literary theory had been coined three or more decades earlier, it would have received adequate literary and critical responses just like every other sociological theory that has found expression in African literary circle.

Though he claims that ecocriticism is a 'global movement', Slaymaker uses "a primarily Anglo-American ecocritical framework" (Caminero-Santangelo 698) as a paradigm for the appraisal of texts, "to determine if a piece of writing is properly environmental"(698). This surfaces as a serious pitfall in Slaymaker's critical evaluation of African ecocritical output from the 80s and 90s. As we have earlier mentioned, there are questions that bother the western ecocritic, but are taken with levity, in Africa, because they have, from the primordial soup, found answers in orthodox African cultural values and practices. So, it is improper for Slaymaker to judge African literary ecological imagination using American and British ecocritical criteria and principles. With this kind of engagement, one is forced to think and argue from the post-colonial viewpoint. Such argument may include the justification that Africa is detached from 'global' network, and her values cannot be incorporated into the differing sets of values that make up any global engagement or action. Hence, what is global is in every sense Western, since anything that falls outside the values and practices of the West is grossly deficient and irrelevant in determining what is acceptable as global. If ecocriticism is truly global in outlook, it should be able to take into

account certain ecological, environmental, and cultural realities of the African universe in relation to the African being. This is so because, Africans have inextricable relationship with their natural environment, and have come to concern themselves so much with the crises plaguing it, with concerted efforts made towards its rescue and conservation. But, this singular act, namely, the failure of Western ecocritics to integrate African ecological practices into what they term 'global' (which is by every means Western), makes ecocriticism a theory that could be fully realised based on cultural beliefs, values and practices, of the milieu of the text.

If one takes into cognizance Glotfelty Fromm's assertion that "environmental writing supports a dualism that asserts nature as totally separate from humanity while ecocritical writing unifies the two, or at least analyzes the relationship between them" (xx), one would be quick to locate a chasm between the Anglo-American and the African praxis of ecocriticism. In Africa, the union between humanity and nature borders more on a natural bond than any artificially fabricated nexus. The traditional African is born with the knowledge that he is his environment and his environment him, and not like the American or British, who focuses on unifying man and nature artificially. So, against Western misapprehension and bias that, the African does not understand his environment, and hence needs the Westernised African, or at worse, the Western critic to interpret for him his natural environment is an illusion. In fact, it is another way of imposing imperial culture on colonies, so that their cultural practices would continue to maintain a hegemonic space in 'global' cultural discourses.

Ecocriticism is like feminism, because the culture in which it operates plays an indispensable role when it is used to evaluate a text. This is so because; human attitude towards nature and the ecosphere vary substantially from culture to culture. In traditional African society, when modernity had nothing to do with her, man depended solely on nature for survival. Herbs and plants served man extensively. Mountains, hills, and

trees were also there to serve man. But upon the intrusion of modernity or western civilisation, everything changed, and then the need to be in tune with it became paramount. Roads were constructed, which meant the destruction of mountains, trees, and plants and species, without taken into cognizance the essence of nature to the African man in his natural habitat. Then, furniture replaced seats constructed with clay, and the hewed trees were mostly exported by the colonialists to the Centre, for commercial purposes. Like Feminism, culture matters greatly when ecocriticism is mentioned, because of variations in cultural experiences, beliefs, and values.

At this point, we can infer that though it started in the west, ecocriticism has spread across the world, and has since become an established literary tradition in the African cosmos. In fact, in the last few decades, environmentalism and the study of man and the ecosystem have become a fast-spreading area of literary engagement, which has found a ubiquitous voice in many works of African creative writers. Slaymaker contends thus:

Black African critics and writers have traditionally embraced nature writing, land issues and landscape themes that are pertinent to national and local cultural claims and that also function as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environmental evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated. A review of any number of bibliographies, literary histories, and anthologies of black African literature and criticism in the past several decades will bear out this intense interest in the local recapture of a violated nature (683).

Also, in his appraisal of eco-criticism in African literature with regard to the journey thus far, Byron Caminero-Santangelo articulates thus:

In the past fifteen years, African environmental activism has been brought to the world's attention through the martyrdom of Ken Saro Wiwa and more recently, by the awarding of the Nobel Peace prize

to Wangari Maathai. These figures point not only to the ways that Africans have mobilized against environmental degradation, but also to the grave environmental problems faced by Africa which have become, especially in conjunction with social problems, a significant threat to its present and future-well-being(698).

In Africa, environmental activism has continued to grow tremendously. This growth is often attributed to the global struggle against ecological crisis. By writing about the degradation of their environment, the African writer aims to demonstrate his drive to play his part in the ecological struggles. The modern African writer cannot be silent because, "more than a century of imperial and neo-imperial attitudes and practices has resulted in intractable environmental problems as well as in the need for new kinds of environmental discourses" (Caminero-Santangelo & Myers 2). The attitudes have further compounded the environmental crisis ravaging the African society. This is supported by Nwagbara who states that ecological imperialism "has left the Nigerian society environmentally battered" (19). This accounts for the reason why, like Ojaide, the African creative writer "allows the social facts in his lived environment to find expression in his art"(23).

African ecocritical writers work round the clock to ensure that nature's wounds are healed, and the hitherto inextricable relationship that traditionally existed between man and nature resurfaces to replace what currently obtains between humanity and the natural environment. This way, man's negative attitudes towards his ecological space would terminate, and careful and positive attitudes would be what issues from man to her, and then our ecosystem would rejuvenate. According to Hamoud Yahya Ahmed & Ruzy Suliza Hashim, "ecosystems are highly sensitive and frequently disrupted by human misdeeds and ill-treatment of the natural world, leading to extinction of species of plants and animals whose ecosystems have been compromised"(9).

The entire impulse and focus behind both African and Anglo-American ecocriticism is rightly captured in the words of Shoba and Nagaraj thus:

Now-a-days, almost all people have turned their attention towards the planet of life, the earth. The ecosystem which accommodates human beings acts reflexively. Whatever humans do to the Mother Earth, have the deeds reflected on them. A sudden attraction towards the ecosystem came about when scientists found a hole in the ozone layer. Then the people began probing the planet more and more. They became more conscious of the environment in which they live (639).

So “When people slowly started understanding what is happening to the ecosystem where they live, they started relating the ecological study – which considered the ecological problems like pollution, global warming, etc. – to literature” (Shoba & Nagaraj 639). This has also been the situation in Africa, where ecocriticism has become domesticated, and has been growing considerably due to the indiscriminate exploitation of nature, especially birthed and encouraged by colonialism. Gitanjali Gogoi's avowal clearly illustrates and justifies the grounds on which ecocritical practices started and has continued to expound, in Africa:

The present day environmental predicament is a sure result of the age-old practice of exploitation of nature and abuse of the environment for the benefit of human civilization. While the reshaping of nature has been executed throughout human history, the episode of European colonialism is the most outstanding example of human interference with nature as the whole enterprise of colonization was based on the idea of exploiting nature and its resources. The Western cultural tradition of using nature for human benefits was most strongly propounded through colonialism. In fact, it is not only during the era of colonization, but the practice against nature is being carried out in the neocolonial period in the

present day circumstances. Therefore the blame for environmental crisis falls primarily on the West as it is inspired by the Western principle of separation of the human from the non-human (1).

We can, therefore, conclude that, “even though 'Ecocriticism' is comparatively new as the movement started only in the late 20th century, study of nature and man in literature dates back to the ancient times” (Chingangbam 60), and it has continued to surge due to increase in the havoc constantly wreaked on our ecological sphere by local and foreign capitalists. African literary writers have also contributed significantly to its growth, just the same way the West has. If by any means the West has engaged more committedly in literary ecological activism, then it is a way of cleaning off the mess they have created with their 'civilising missions' and inventions, as posited by Gogoi in the foregoing assertion.

Ojaide's Poetry and the Ecocritical Tradition

Nwagbara is of the opinion that “Ojaide uses literature for environmentalist purposes. He places premium on the biotic community—its sustainability and preservation” (28). This artistic vision is fervently demonstrated in the poem 'When Green was the Lingua Franca’, in which he unequivocally paints the idyllic landscape retrospectively and juxtaposes it with the current state of the same environment that once paralleled the much talked-about Eden Garden. The word 'green' in the title of the poem is symbolic of fertility, thereby defining the Niger-Delta ecology as a fertile landscape before its desecration. In this poem, Ojaide takes a historic and retrospective journey into his blissful childhood, and relays to us, how much of thrills and fascination defined it:

My childhood stretched
One unbroken park,
Teeming with life.
In the forest green was the lingua franca
With many dialects (12)

He goes on to reveal the seascape and its fullness before toxic wastes were unfeelingly sent into it, killing its inhabitants: "I remember erhuvwudjayorho/Such a glamorous fish". The poet seems to be expressing great pain over the disappearance of this beautiful creature of nature. In his reminiscence, he continues to recount the cordial relationship man used to maintain with nature, how he (the poet) dashed freely into the Eden Garden to obtain whatever fruit he wanted, and how beautiful it was at that time when he could commune with Nature. Before the rape of the natural ecological landscape of the Deltas, Ojaide tells us:

Snails and *koto* lured me
to tear through tangles
that seasoned my soles
to defy every distance.
Urhurhu grapes coloured
my tongue scarlet,
the owe apple fell to me
as cherries and breadfruit
on wind-blessed day (12)

In the first line of the above excerpt, Ojaide particularly humanises snails and *kotos* by personifying them with the exclusive human attribute of luring. This means therefore that, they too had tangible existence and could give happiness, as we see in the poet who abandoned himself to the beautiful images of these creatures and covered distances just to behold them. We see also 'the owe apple' falling willingly to the poet, in form of an embrace, an action only humans are capable of carrying out. The entire essence is to highlight man's hitherto original closeness and rapport with nature, and nature's own consistent desire to satisfy man.

The poet's sublime childhood in a stainless, well-afforested, environment is seen in the last part of the second stanza. At this time, we are invited to inhabit a forest of assorted trees; a forest of a thousand

trees, and share the exuberance of a child overwhelmed by Nature and its aesthetic bounties. He gallivants endlessly in a forest, playing with Nature. He tells us that:

The cotton trees made me
Fly for tossed-out fluffs;
The gum tree took fingerprints
Before invisible policemen
Ikere froglets fell from skies (12)

His admiration for the bucolic scene and the halcyon days continues, as he recalls how fishermen laboured less but harvested fish in abundance. We are told how "the skipper-fish overflow/culverts into fisher's ambush. This was, when Nature could still conveniently serve man without complaints; when everything was still green and the ecology was in its best shape.

The above is one pole of the dialectic created by Ojaide to compare and contrast nature as it was and as it is at the moment, when man has fragmented it with sabres of greed. This second pole lays bare the pollution, despoliation, desecration and degradation of the Niger-Delta ecology and its corollary effects on the biosphere, biodiversity and the ecosystem. In fact, the ozone layer has become so dangerously depleted that species have become consequently endangered. We are told how:

...Shell broke the bond
with quakes and a hell
of flares. Stoking a hearth
under God's very behind (13)

Pained by this deprivation of his idyllic ecological space, the poet continues to articulate gory and devastating images which divorced him and his people from Nature, and sounded a death knell on the environment and the entire biosphere. He attributes this inhumanity to

the multinational industry, which incessantly engages in gas flaring and emission of other noxious wastes into the atmosphere and seascape. He reveals that:

Explosion of shells to *under*
Mine grease-black gold
Drove the seasons mental
And to walk on their heads (13)

In the third to the last stanza, the poet bemoans the demise of some creatures of Nature, which gave man succour and sustained his existence. Here again, we see the personification of trees as creatures, with heads to behead. This kind of personification reveals Ojaide's perception of these plants as human beings. The tone of the poem unveils Ojaide's disappointment over the capitalist activities that have so damaged the delicate fabrics of nature, the same nature that has served man altruistically in all spheres. Ojaide laments:

I see victims of arson
Wherever my restless soles
Take me to bear witness
The Ethiopie waterfall
wiped out by prospectors?
so many trees beheaded
and streams mortally poisoned (13)

We are again to sympathise with the poet whose ecology is now bereft of its natural endowments. The herbs which provide healing to the ailing have been destroyed and can serve man no more, and the herbalists have been inevitably rendered useless, with their communion with nature abruptly broken. Ojaide states thus:

Now I commune with ghosts
of neighbours and providers
whose healing hands of leaves
and weeds have been amputated (14)

In the poem "Seasons" Ojaide continues to lament the pathetic state of the Niger-Delta landscape, its despoliation, his people's deprivation and marginalisation. He draws our attention to how imperialists' exploitation of oil in the region has done a great disservice to not only the landscape, but the seascape, in which case the people no longer have access to potable water. The imagery of 'oil slick' reminds us of the oil spillage that ravaged the area decades ago. He tells us that 'Our towns rose from riverbanks of barter/Once the waters sustained colouring from oil slick (15).

Knowing full-well the grave damage this spillage caused and still liable to cause, it became imperative to liaise with the necessary authority so as to rescue the ecology from further destruction and help in the fight against global warming currently plaguing our world. But those who took up the challenge are sent off 'from the promised land' to continue to wallow in their suffering. The 'promised land' is a Biblical allusion, and it delineates an oasis, and this paradise is Abuja, where the lords reside and work in cahoots with the multinational companies exploiting the Niger-Delta and destroying its fragile ecology, with repercussions on its habitants. In this poem, Abuja is again personified, and at this time it is a metonymy that stands for the people occupying the seat of authority and power; it is a human being who receives complaints. Their effort to rescue the environment from further pillage and revive it is captured in:

our constitution cannot remain the same again—
we selected delegates to take our prayers to Abuja,
but guns scared them from the promised land (15)

In the poem "Wails" Ojaide laments the unlawful execution of an environmental activist, who had attempted to salvage the situation in the Niger-Delta region. Everybody tends to mourn their beloved revolutionary, who knew the essence of Nature and had championed the war against its destruction and its people. The poet reveals how:

Streets echo with wails
A terrible thing has struck the land,
everyone is covered with shame or sorrow—
this death exceeds other deaths
They murdered a favourite son,
this news cannot be a hoax;
they have hanged a favourite son
and eight other bearers of truth(18)

This tragic execution of this warrior constitutes great pain and worries to the poet and his people. With rhetorical questions, the poet seeks to know how they hope to overcome their pathetic environmental devastation, and bring joy to the land. He asks:

Who will make me laugh,
Who will bring *Basse*y & Company to life?
the lingua franca of the coastline?
Who will tell the forest of flowers?
Who will traverse the darkling plain of the delta?
Who will stand in front as the *iroko* shield
to regain the stolen birthright of millions?
It's for his immeasurable services
that the giant's remembered
There will be no end to this wail (18)

The resistance activities of the dead warrior are certainly immeasurable and profound. These account for the poet's interrogation on whether there will ever be anyone who can manifest such valour and altruism in the environmental struggles and the struggle against deprivation and marginalisation. The impact of his revolutionary measures is ubiquitous, that is why "There will be no end to this wail." (18) Their defence is broken and they have become much more endangered than they were, since their messiah and other fighters are gone:

The hardwood shield is broken,
the people are exposed to a storm of abuse;

the diviner's spell is broken
& everybody's left in the open (19)

At this point, he resorts to Aridon, and conjures him up in his readiness to fight the battle for his people and his environment and the entire ecosystem:

Aridon, give me the voice
to raise beyond high walls.
In one year I have seen my forest of trees cut down,
Now dust taunts my memory
If I don't open my mouth,
I will be a dumb-and-deaf
Who's unable to forewarn
After a bad dream (17)

The poem "Delta Blues" begins with a reminiscence of the Arcadian life of the poet's childhood, and he is plunged into nostalgia, causing him to paint the pitiable images of the present state of his environment, which sharply contrasts with what he had known as a child. In fact, he calls the environment of his childhood 'paradise'. He states thus:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,
Reels from an immeasurable wound
Barrels of alchemical draught flow
From this hurt to the unquestionable world
That lights up its life in a blind trust.(21)

He goes on to list the resources with which the environment is endowed and had enjoyed before humans broke the bond with nature, via toxic substances and negative activities in the biosphere. These resources were yields of nature that provided man with satisfaction (both materially and otherwise). But nature has been made unproductive and frail by man's unhealthy relationship with the natural environment and the entire ecosystem. Plants are withering, animals are disappearing, their natural habitat has become inhabitable and endangered, the seas

have become toxic, murdering sea creatures, and the fisherman stripped of his means of livelihood. The farmer who no longer has arable and fertile land to cultivate is not left out, as well as the soul-killing drought and famine midwifed by man's insensitivity to the demands of the natural environment. He sadly tells us that:

The rivers are dark-veined,
a course of perennial draught
this home of salt and fish
stilted in mangroves, market of barter,
always welcomes others—
hosts the guests flourished
on palm oil, yams and garri
the home of plants and birds
least expected a stampede;
there's no refuge east or west
north or south of this paradise(21)

The metaphors and imagery in the above excerpt suggest that the region was a place that was home to everyone because of its evergreen, with its rivers that overcame heat and prevented diseases that could result from excessive heat and exposure to scorching sun. It was a self-sufficient land in terms of foodstuffs and natural resources. But today deforestation has claimed these trees, and the plants claimed by contamination of the soil. All this has synergised to inflict the people with diseases and penury. At this point one is prompted to query: what other disservice could be done to nature than the one already painted? Ojaide reveals the glamour that defined the land and how it attracted outsiders:

Did others not envy my evergreen,
which no reason or season could steal
but only brighten with desire?
Did others not envy the waters
that covered me from sunstroke,
scourge of others the year round?(21)

The use of rhetorical questions in the above stanza is quite emphatic, and draws our attention to the state of the original Delta landscape and ultimately prompts us to decry the great loss that the environment as well as the ecology has suffered in the course of time as a result of man's shortcomings.

Ojaide's lamentation does not end here; he goes further to uncover how counterproductive the oil which should be a great source of joy is at the moment. It is a blessing-turn-doom. So instead of living in luxury, penury and sorrow describe the state of these hapless people. He achieves this with the concrete use of symbolisms and personifications. He says:

My nativity gives immortal pain
masked in barrels of oil—
I stew in the womb of fortune.
I live in the deathbed
prepared by a cabal of brokers
breaking the peace of centuries
& tainting not only a thousand rivers,
But lifeblood from beginning,
But scorching the air and soil (21)

He finds this whole scenario pathetic and wants urgent change in the status quo. But who are those to fight fervently and altruistically in a world where the self takes precedence over communal interest. At this point, the poet reckons with the selfless engagement of the late activists, spearheaded by Ken Saro Wiwa. He acknowledges them as true to the cause of the people and their environment, and then begins to wonder if there are people who can transcend their bounds in the course of the revolutionary struggles. He concludes that there are none. He says, for instance:

Nobody can go further than those mounds
in the fight to right chronic habits
of greed and every wrong of power (23)

In “Elegy for Nine Warriors” Ojaide reflects on the valiant struggles of executed environmental revolutionaries, who had always stood up for the environment and the people of the Niger-Delta region. They understood the benefits of nature to man and strived to insulate it from total destruction. These are “those I remember in my song” and they are expected to “outlive this ghoulish season”, because they were those who walked “back erect from the stake.”(25) He uses a paradox to a certain effect here. We are made to believe that they remain alive even in death, because they will produce avatars to continue the struggle. This is what is meant when he states that “the nine start their life after death”. He believes their death will only spur more people to action and engender a call to arms, instead of dampening people's spirits. He tells us:

The hangman has made his case,
delivered nine heads through the sunpost
and sore'd his eyes from sleepless nights.
The nine start their life after death
as the street takes over their standard (25)

These valiant warriors are simply unforgettable, because they lived and died for the cause of the environment and the marginalised population of the Niger-Delta region. He states that, “nine marchers who died carrying/our destiny on their broad chests—/will surely outlive the blood-laden season” (25).

Conclusion

In the poems analysed above, Ojaide explores the society from the prism of ecocriticism. He draws readers' attention to the damage currently being suffered the African environment, which comes as an upshot of man's exploitation of his natural environment, for his selfish interest. We see Ojaide's agitations against environmental degradation and his campaign for man's changed attitude towards nature, thus establishing the ecocritical praxis in the African cultural space. Dialectically, he creates an avenue for people to see the likely benefits nature would yield

to man when his attitude is positive, and then the lack that man would experience when he privileges negative attitudes to it. He achieves this through a retrospective journey into his idealistic childhood, when man tended the earth like its own child, and the earth in turn served man abundantly. It was a time when varieties of food were available to man; when seafoods had not turned scarce commodities, and animals were also available as meat in man's food. It was a time when man had free access to varieties of fruit, and like the Biblical Eden Garden, man ate them at will. Also, vegetables of different species were sufficiently available to man. But today, as Ojaide captures, those bounties of nature have disappeared, and just like the punitive measure meted out to Adam and Eve upon the fall, man now finds himself deprived of those things he used to access with much ease. The hitherto fertile and attractive landscape has now become infertile and unattractive as a result of the release and flaring of toxic substances into rivers, land and the atmosphere from the greedy exploration of oil in the region by imperialist multinational companies in cahoots with the Federal Government of Nigeria. Today, fishermen and women, farmers, and all those who used to earn a living from the fullness of nature have now become disempowered economically, and many of them have taken to arms. All this portrayal is a pointer to environmentalism; the presence of the ecocritical theory, in African literary circle.

The African natural environment as captured in Ojaide's poems is a degraded one calling for urgent rescue and conservation. It is an environment suffering untold despoliation where African environmentalists are striving hard to preserve, conserve, recreate, in order to avert an environmental apocalypse. The fact that Africans now inhabit a world plagued by unabating ecological crises, and have joined in the global fight against the environmental crises, is enough reason why Africa's environment should constitute a global concern.

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