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**THE ENVIRONMENT AND POLITICS: A READING  
OF TANURE OJAIDE'S THE TALE OF THE  
HARMATTAN**

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**Abstract**

*Ever since the exploration of oil in Nigeria, there has been outcry over the persistent degradation of the landscape of the Niger Delta region of the country. The reaction concerns the wanton destruction of the ecological lives of the people, the threat posed by constant gas flaring and the abject poverty of the people occasioned by their perceived neglect by successive governments in Nigeria and the oil exploring companies. This paper examines Tanure Ojaide's presentation of the environmental challenges of the people of Niger Delta region of Nigeria and looks into the relevance of the issues raised in the poems to the development of the Nigerian nation. Consequently, ecocriticism is used as the theoretical framework in a bid to reveal the poet's portrayal of the people traumatised by the environmentally induced problem. It is our view that his satire will present ways of ameliorating challenges confronting the people and sensitise the government and the oil companies to be alive to their responsibilities.*

**Key Words:** Environmental degradation, neglect, Niger delta, oil and gas exploration, government, development

**Introduction**

Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* is in three parts: The first contains eleven poems, the second part is made

up of seven poems while the third has nine poems. Attempts will be made to examine parts one and two through a study of seven and three poems respectively. In the poems examined, we shall look into the poet's revelation of the lopsided distribution of the Nigerian nation's resources which manifests in the underdevelopment or outright neglect of the Niger Delta area of the country. The area which ironically produces the mainstay of the nation's economy.

The poet, through a number of poems like “The goat Song”, “quatrain suite”, “oil remedies” and “swimming in a water hole” points out environmental challenges confronting the people. This hinges on environmental degradation as a fall out of the oil exploration in the area, incessant oil spillage which endangers the ecological life of the people, poor infrastructural development due to several years of neglect by successive governments in Nigeria and gas flaring with its attendant health challenges to the people.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Ecocriticism shall constitute the theory which this study will be anchored on. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The movement exists in the United States of America and the United Kingdom with affiliates in Ireland, Japan, India, Korea, Taiwan, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In the United States, it takes its literary bearings from three major

nineteenth century American writers whose works celebrate nature, the life force and the wilderness as manifested in America. They are: Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 -1882), Margaret Fuller (1810- 1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). These writers were members of the group of New England writers, essayists and philosophers known collectively as the transcendentalists, the first major literary movement in America to achieve 'cultural independence'. The U.K version of ecocriticism, or green studies, takes its bearings from the British Romanticism of the 1790s. The founding figure is the critic, Jonathan Bate. Generally, the preferred American term is 'ecocriticism', whereas the 'green studies' is frequently used in the U.K. Peter Barry (1993) observes that “there is perhaps a tendency for the American writing to be 'celebratory' in tone, ... whereas the British variant tends to be more 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neo- colonial forces.” (251). The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) is the principal [professional association](#) for American and international scholars of [ecocriticism](#). It was founded in 1992.

Camilo Gomide's (13) definition of ecocriticism will be the rallying point for the analysis of Tanure Ojaide's position in the selected poems in *The Tale of the Harmattan*. He puts ecocriticism as “the field of enquiry that analyzes and

promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature while also motivating audience to live within a limit that will be binding over generations”. This is consequent upon the all encompassing outlook of the definition as it deals with the ecological concerns and its effects on nature.

### **Lopsided Distribution of Wealth**

Over the years, the penurious condition of the Niger Deltans has engaged the attention of environmentalists, critics and writers. Their concern centres on the poor state of social amenities in the region. In “The goat song”, Ojaide reinforces the neglect and the attendant deprivation which the people of the Niger Delta have been experiencing. Those sitting on wealth are rickety, grovelling on sand; globules of anguish their only share. Ojaide (9)

Ojaide employs hyperbole 'grovelling on sand' to reveal the extent of penurious state of his people. Abrams and Geoffrey (166) notes that hyperbole “...may be used either for serious or ironic or comic effect” So, he avers that the poverty ridden condition of the people is in contrast with the abundant resources derivable in their land. In another part of the poem, the poet sarcastically hints at the expatriates' indifference to the people's plight as well as successive government's connivance with the multinational oil companies in neglecting and subjugating the Niger Deltans:

And who cares if foreigners found deep under their  
bare feet divine gifts of pools and started to tap the  
earth's underbelly for fuel to blaze brushes of  
progress Ojaide (ibid)

Here, Ojaide expresses disgust towards the apparent nonchalance of the government to the destructive attitude of the oil companies with couplets. These couplets are also in enjambments and they indicate that the poet is involved in outpouring of emotion as a result of the pitiable plight of his people. The uneven distribution of resources in Nigeria is seen as unfavourable to the people of the Niger Delta region who suffer deplorable infrastructural condition with several communities without power supply, even when the oil companies which are located therein use electricity all day long.

In the poem, “for my grandchild”, the poet echoes the appalling state of the people whose fortune dwindles as a result of imbalance in the social index that puts them at a disadvantage, despite the fact that they are blessed with abundant wealth in their environment:

With crude oil gushing into slave ships

refurbished as free-market super-tankers.

The government assures people of development  
with proceeds from export and spot market deals.

No jobs for the graduates in the oil sector

even as wells litter the family's farmlands. Ojaide (22)

Ojaide tacitly condemns the connivance of the Nigerian government with the expatriate oil companies who find it difficult to give sustainable employment to the youths of the Niger Delta, despite the exploration of oil and gas in the area. It therefore becomes clear that both the Nigerian government and the expatriate oil companies are doing little to ameliorate the suffering of the Niger Delta through provision of gainful employment to the youth, hence the youth's restiveness in the area. Ogundiya (28) observes:

... To the militants,  
the federal government  
and the oil companies are  
seen as exploiters,  
oppressors and destroyers  
of the Niger Delta  
environment. There is little  
doubt that the majority of  
people and communities in  
the Niger Delta also share  
this perception ...

It is the belief of the people in the Niger Delta region of the country that they are being surcharged in the provision of the basic necessities of life as the poor infrastructural condition of the area contrasts sharply with the abundant wealth which the Nigerian government and the oil companies derive from there. Ojaide points out the irony in the area that experience incessant gas flaring, which is without constant electricity. This view is expressed in "Oil remedies" thus:

This oil bleeding from the earth flowers light

and they sing hymns to fan its incandescence.  
It is we who live in the dark that give out light.  
They make bonfires of our blind ancestors' gifts.  
after hauling away priceless pools of abundance  
and leaving with us silent and roaming epidemics.

Ojaide (28)

Ojaide reiterates the apparent devastation of the Niger delta area through infusion of paradox into the couplets above. This enables him to emphasise the contrastive existence of the hapless people who live in squalor and the insensitive oil companies.

Environmental activists like Ken Saro Wiwa (1995) Kaine Agary (2006) corroborate the position of Ojaide that oil exploration in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria has not bestowed the desired benefit on the people rather they have been exposed to environmental induced risk like acid rain as a result of gas flaring, threat to ecological life due to incessant oil spillage and a host of other challenges which make life and living unbearable in the Niger Delta.

### **Environmental Challenges in the Niger Delta**

Tanure Ojaide lampoons both the government and the oil companies for their insensitivity to the attendant health challenges posed by oil and gas exploration to the Niger Deltans. The quality of the people's life is seriously impaired by oil spillages which kill the fishes in their rivers and thus

aggravate the poverty in the area since the people who are mainly subsistent farmers can neither cultivate the land nor fish in the rivers. In “Quatrain Suite”, Ojaide emphasises the ecological concerns the Niger Delta people cope with as a result of oil spillage, which has affected their social and economic life.

We have plenty of bait but no fish in the water -

decades of genocide, millions of victims. Ojaide (19)

He insinuates that the ecological life of the Niger Deltans was pleasant prior to the exploration of oil in the area but the activities of the expatriates have exposed the people and the environment to serious risk because of their inability to engage in farming as they used to do before the discovery of oil in their region. The poet observes that as incessant gas flaring burns out the palm trees that served as the economic mainstay of the people before oil exploration, the government and the oil expatriates celebrate their fortune and are indifferent to the suffering the people go through.

Ojaide observes that it is not only the people that are affected, the animal life is also a subject of environmental degradation, as the trees, which the birds and beetles perch on, are destroyed and the vegetation is also exposed to danger. So, while the inhabitants of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria cannot enjoy the natural phenomenon like the sun, the moon, and the stars as a result of industrial fumes, so do the animals lose their abodes in the trees,. Hence, oil exploration is detrimental to



the life of the people, their environment and the animals in the Niger Delta. Thus, the poems in *The Tale of the Harmattan* draw attention to the miserable existence of the people that provide economic sustenance for the Nigerian nation. Ojaide, as a result fulfils the responsibility of poets of his age which Egya (66) puts thus:

... Poets in Nigeria, since the emergence of the second generation of poets heralded by the poetry of Odia Ofeimun, have come to see themselves as socially committed poets. Their poetry is concerned with socio-political issues that affect the ordinary people in the society.

The deplorable state of the commoners in the Niger Delta makes Ojaide to recount with nostalgia the serene but rustic life of the people before oil exploration. In “Tale of the harmattan”. Ojaide laments the devastation of the environment which prevents the people from receiving warmth from the burnt trees, as they do before all exploration.

The exciting spirit of the harmattan is lost on us,  
there is nothing to celebrate with bonfires  
Ojaide (23).

It is pathetic that the people experience misery due to nonchalant attitude of the oil expatriates who do not see the need to protect the oil communities from the untoward effect of oil exploration and consequently, the natural phenomenon

of the weather is lost on the people. 'The Harmattan', which Ojaide refers to in the couplet above, is a season in West Africa when the temperatures can be as low as 3 degrees Celsius. and because of the unfriendly weather, the Niger Delta people use the warmth in the hearth to douse the effect of the cold.

All the lines in “Tale of the harmattan” are written in couplet to foreground the sorrowful state of the people. Mclanghlin (online) observes that poems whose content is melancholy or depressing, for example, can make good use of the couplet. Hence, Ojaide expresses the devastation of his people through this style. 'The Harmattan' symbolises period of destruction in the region when human, plant and animal life go withered occasioned by the weather and oil exploration. Because, the people are deprived of the natural means of surviving the excruciating cold of the Harmattan, they are thus forced to contend with artificial contraction with its attendant health risks

In place of heat from the log-stoked hearth.  
we burn from gas flares and oil blowouts.  
on insomniac nights in the big compound.  
We no longer swathe ourselves from cold  
in one blanket, warn and inhaling body odour;  
the sparkling hearth telling our tale of the harmattan.  
Ojaide (24)

In “for my grand child”, Ojaide likens the present state of affairs in the Niger Delta to what obtained during the slave

trade era when human dignity was not accorded any form of priority. He avers that the ship conveying oil is not in any way different from the ones used by the slave traders. This comparison becomes expedient because the oil expatriates display the same level of insensitivity and callousness which the slave traders were known for. Ojaide insinuates that both the slave traders of the past and the present oil exporters profit from the people's misery and are not interested in improving their well being. It is ironical that centuries after the abolition of the slave trade, the Niger Deltans are being made to live excruciating life reminiscence of the notorious and inhuman slave trade era. Though, the people are in the so called jet age and are in a sovereign state, their state of affairs is not in any way different from the Stone Age period with its attendant infrastructural decay and repression of the people.

With my grandchild born, the new Stone Age of a nation very black in the books has begun with refilled slave ships refurbished as super-tankers anchored at Escravos and poaching inland as centuries ago. Ojaide (22).

The personae in this poem laments the dwindling fortune of the people whose children cannot benefit from scholarship despite the huge profit the oil merchants make in the area. It is also pitiable that these children from the Niger Delta, who decided to take to farming (land cultivation and fishing) have their efforts thwarted by oil spillage and to make matters

worse, the oil companies do not give them employment. So, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, gloom is boldly written on the faces of the youths who cannot realise their ambition in life despite the abundance of wealth in their environment.

The destruction of the environment in the Niger Delta is total, as it affects the human, animals (both land and sea) and the gods. The ecological challenges posed by incessant oil spillage also made life unbearable for the gods {water spirits}, who are forced to seek for shelter elsewhere. Ojaide reflects in the poem “At the Kaima Bridge” that the gods in the Niger Delta, (it is the belief of the people that certain gods are resident in the sea) wary of the impurity of the oil expatriates, have taken leave of the area for safer climes because they cannot endure the mindless pollution of the sea life as well as the incursion of the water hyacinths in their abode. So, the poet stoically quips that it may not be necessary to agitate for the protection of the people and their resources, since the gods, in their spirituality have given up any form of resistance. Oil exploration has chased the gods away and forbids the people from lively activities like boat regatta, fishing and swimming. Hence, the Niger Delta people cannot be said to be happy because oil exploration has made life unbearable for them. Kaine Agary, through one of the characters in her novel, *Yellow Yellow*, reveals the extent of the devastation of the Niger Delta environment thus:

Sometimes when I would sit outside

with boys and girls in my age group, we would listen to the radio, and sometimes we would hear an Ijaw person, living in Port Harcourt or Lagos, speaking about how the oil companies had destroyed our Niger Delta with impurity. They would discuss how the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others. Agary (9)

It is against this backdrop that environmental activists have chosen several platforms to agitate for spirited efforts towards ameliorating the environmental risks the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria experience. The agitation centers on the need for the provision of palliative measures to cushion the effects of the oil spills and gas flaring that are common in the area. More often than not, the environmental activists, the government and the oil companies have been put at logger heads over the issues bordering on abandonment of the Niger Delta area. The government is expected to prevail on the oil companies to constantly embark on cleaning up of the oil spills whenever they occur but this is not always the case as the rivers and farm lands are left devastated after oil spills. Ojaide in “swimming in a waterhole” portrays the negligence of the oil companies in their indifference to destruction of ecological life which oil spillage has caused. Hence, the people are made to grapple with inconveniencies associated with oil spills.

Rivers and lakes must have cried themselves into silence -we spent nothing of our millions of earnings

to save them.

For decades water hyacinth overran the  
pristine waterscape

in conveys of weed and started stifling the  
beautiful host.

With the companies only looking after profit  
margins

oil slicks easily found their way to bury the  
waters alive. Ojaide (36)

The nonchalance of the oil companies in ensuring the well being of the oil communities and the perceived indifference of successive Nigerian governments towards their attitude culminate into restiveness in the Niger Delta which always creep into our discourse anytime the issue of the area come up for discussion. Darah (101) notes that “... a titanic struggle for human dignity and freedom from oppression has been going on in the Niger Delta since the mid 1960s”. In recent time, the Nigerian society has witnessed series of uprising from the Niger Delta area which are capable of threatening the cooperate existence of the nation, due to economic importance of the area to Nigeria. Anytime there is insurgence in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, there is always a corresponding shortfall in the nation's oil output and ultimately the revenue accruable to the country.

### **Oil and Insurgence in the Niger Delta**

The environmental degradation in the Niger Delta and the reluctance of the oil companies to make the area more habitable for the people have resulted in frequent crises which make the area a hotbed of insurgence in Nigeria. Ojaide reflects on the series of protests that has dogged the Niger Delta, as a result of problems associated with oil and gas exploration in the area. In “for my grandchild”, Ojaide takes the readers to the time when a number of women protested the deplorable state of affairs in the Niger Delta. He brings the issue to the fore in order to show the extent of the devastation of the area which propelled the women to register their displeasure with the powers that be, to prevail on the oil companies to curb the environmental hazards being unleashed on the Niger Deltans. He says:

Villages of imploring eyes marching hands up -  
raised with green –leafed branches, mowed down.  
CNN and BBC embedded with Chevron and Shell  
report that local women, stripping before cameras  
to save their dying children and men, are primitive.  
In their secure wings they know not Ogonis agonies.  
Ojaide (22).

The protesting women seek to bring their predicament to the attention of the international community, so that, the multinational oil companies would be made to redress the subjugation of the Niger Delta people. But quite disturbing is the attitude of the foreign media to the women's peaceful

protest which they dubbed as barbaric, apparently because it was a castigation of international oil companies which they probably have sympathy for. Ken Saro Wiwa in one of his outbursts against the hypocrisy of the people frustrating the well being of the Niger Deltans, says: "...The tenor of my extempore speech was that we would have to face both the rulers of Nigeria and Shell which had denigrated us and laid great burdens on individual Ogoni people ...” Saro-Wiwa (132).

The untoward activity of the oil expatriate which has not been properly checked by the Nigerian government may have set the stage for confrontation between the oil communities and the duo of Nigerian government and the oil companies. In recent times, the media reports of insurgency that came about as a consequence of environmental degradation have assumed serious dimension to the extent that oil is often associated with violence. The situation is gradually leading to semblance of revolution as Ojaide observes in “At the Kaima Bridge” thus:

Is revolution dead and must the Egbesu Boys  
surrender rights of ownership and humanity  
to the brigand lord and his fierce livery  
of insatiable appetites raising a flaming flag?  
Ojaide (34)

So, oil exploration in the Niger Delta and the resultant environmental problems have paved way for militancy, which



more often than not, are in the violent mode. Years of neglect of the region may have aggravated the protests, which are spear headed by Egbesu Boys, Movement for the survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP) and in recent time, the militants. These movements have made strident calls for the protection of the oil communities against effects of oil exploration and the need for corresponding development of the area. But, both the oil companies and the government have been accused of not giving required attention to the area and these nonchalant attitudes have encouraged violent protests. Saro –Wiwa (161) says:

... Unfortunately where the Niger River Delta (and Ogoni) environment is concerned, the issue is public because the neglect of the past is of enormous proportions and remediation will be expensive.

The clamour for the development of the oil communities in Nigeria has made successive governments in the country to establish bodies like OMPADEC, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and lately the Ministry of Niger Delta and the Amnesty Programme for the disarmed Niger Delta militants. The Federal Government of Nigeria took the initiatives because of the persistent youth restiveness in the area. The Niger Delta youths have registered their disapproval of the underdevelopment in the oil communities in various guises and their protests have attracted local and international attention. Ojaide expresses his support for the

militant youths in the poem “for the Egbesu Boys” thus:

They set hunger on the loose after you;

they unleashed diseases to devour you.

And do they expect you to sit and be enslaved?

Do they expect you to die without fighting back?

Those who bring a running fight to the Iguana

will lose their breath and withdraw before long -

Ojaide (41-2)

Ojaide seems to be echoing the perception of a cross section of environmental activists who denounce the persistent destruction of ecological life by the oil companies and the Nigerian government's failure to call them to order. Ecological challenges bedevilling the oil producing communities have been the talking point at different fora and the discussions have often snowballed into violent clashes with great repercussions. It was one of these crises that led to the alleged murder of four Ogoni chiefs by Ken Saro Wiwa led Ogoni nine (9), the offence for which the latter were tried , convicted and executed for, in the year 1995. One can then say that the poems in *The Tale of the Harmattan* are attestations of the unsavory situation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. G.G Darah is of the view that:

The poetry of Tanure Ojaide and Odia Ofeimun fits into the tradition of outrage against political injustice, exploitation and environmental disasters. On the basis of

output, Ojaide is the most prolific in the Niger Delta region ...

Darah (118).

Ojaide, having identified the myriad of contending issues affecting his immediate society, presents them to the world with a view to demanding equity in the treatment of the people whose environment has been ravaged through oil exploration. There is no gainsaying that, the efforts of poets like Ojaide has brought to the fore the travails and environmental challenges of oil communities. Aliyu (126) observes

... Environmental conscious poets have been championing the debate for a more sensitive exploration of the environment ... These poets have employed images associated with the environment to question man's exploitative tendencies on the earth's resources. The poets use the environment and its components to address social issues which are germane to the survival of man on earth. This is because areas where exploration and exploitation of the earth's resources take place have eventually turned into areas of environmental devastation and growing unrests and violence.

The environmental problem of the oil communities is thus, seen as the problem confronting the entire human race which demands immediate solution. It is unarguable that, if the

agitation of the environmental enthusiasts portrayed in novels, poems and plays are given adequate attention the spates of insurgence often associated with the oil communities will be minimised.

### **Conclusion**

The environment bestows tranquillity and serenity to man and this explains why efforts should be geared towards protecting this God - given resource. Explorations or extraction of oil should not be made to hamper human existence and neither should it pose ecological challenges to aquatic life.

Olaide uses poems in *The Tale of Harmattan* to cast aspersions on governments especially in the developing world for their failure to ensure that there is upgrade of infrastructural facilities in the oil communities. He argues that the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria should not be subjected to hardships and deprivation on account of their environment.

The poet castigates the multinational oil companies for their indifference to the plight of the Niger Deltans. He wants them to employ all avenues to minimise the incessant oil spillage which destroys farm produce and kill ocean life. The condemnable act of the oil companies through ignoring of oil spills for a long period of time and subjecting the people to harrowing existence is satirized in the poems. Ojaide ridicules the oil companies and the Nigerian government for

doing nothing to combat the incidence of gas flaring which exposes the people to environmentally induced acid rain with its attendant health risk.

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