

ECOCRITICISM AND THE AESTHETICS OF NIGER DELTA LITERATURE: TOWARDS A NEW REGIME OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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Abstract

The essay contributes to the extant scholarly attempts that have used Ecocriticism to survey the African literary topography. Ecocriticism as a literary theory probes into the template of literature to articulate the position that authors can extend their satiric instincts to the extent of deploying eco-relevant textual materials to make nihilistic statements against governmental policy makers as evidenced in the Nigerian Niger Delta scenario. The paper draws, extensively, and purposively too, on Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. It goes ahead to handpick very useful textual corollaries from notable plays and poems to justify Ojaide's claim for ecoactivism as portrayed in his novel. Thus the selection extends beyond Ojaide's oeuvre to make to buttress the justification for the application of the theory of Ecocriticism. The study draws the conclusion that if Ecocriticism is taken seriously in the evaluation of literature, *vis a vis* its presentation of the physical environment, then both the theory and Niger Delta literature are compatible bed fellows.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Literary Criticism, Literary Space, Ecological space*

EPIGRAM

Since literature plays a significant role in communicating the people's experience through conscientious narration, Nigerian literature, particularly, literature from the Niger Delta region are deployed to reveal ecological issues as they affect the region and the country as a whole. This has given birth to ecocritical studies. – Kekeghe and Orife

Introduction

The symbiotic relationship between Literature and Literary Criticism has provoked the emergence of several theoretical countenances with several grandiloquent 'isms'. In specific terms, as the canons of literature continue to flourish globally with the publications of multi-angular and multi-thematic experimentations, convoluted theories and meta-theories, which had surfaced to match the contiguous convolutions that accompany such publications, evolved. Quite often nowadays, a critic, of necessity, seems compelled to grapple with postmodernist theoretical schisms that hold sway in literary scholarship and it appears that Literary Criticism, which is originally designed to simplify literature, is in itself more difficult than literature. Interestingly, the said complications experienced in the literary space are not

unconnected with the fact that literature has become a meeting point for interdisciplinary interests since its creation and criticism is no longer the exclusives of literary scholars alone.

One of the new critical countenances that this reality has brought to the study of literature is Ecocriticism, a critical insight which seeks to define the geographical space within the creative space of literature with reliance on the definitive tools supplied by the field of Ecology. This paper appropriates Ecocriticism as a new literary-critical essence of the postmodernist era which has evolved to intersect literature with Geography and Ecology in a bid to fashion out new critical idioms which would justify the adoption of geo-ecological icons in the literary space. Because the theoretical demands of Ecocriticism often probe into how ecology gets autographed in literature, it is necessary to hand-pick for study, like we have done presently, eco-sensitive and ecophobic writings that treat man with respect to environmental factors that determine his

being. Hence, with Nigerian Literature in focus, the study aims to explore selections from some Niger Delta writers who have always produced remonstrative forms that draw public attention to the socio-political collapse that could be traced to governmental disrespect for ecological order in the geographical space.

Ecocriticism as Literary Theory

Ecocriticism can be explained in terms of how human beings relate to the environment within the framework of fictional writings. In fact, John Loretta gives an encyclopedic explanation which provides ample knowledge of the theory when he posits.

“Eco”, from the Greek root *oikos*, means “house”... Just as “economy” is the management or law of the house (*nomos* = law), “ecology” is the study of the house. Ecocriticism, then, is the criticism of the “house,” i.e., the environment, as represented in literature. But the definition of “house,” or *oikos*, is not simple. Questions remain: What is the environment? What is nature? Why did the term “environment,” which derives from the verb “to environ or surround,” change to mean that which is nonhuman? Are not humans natural and a prominent environment in themselves? Where and in what does one live? (14)

To say Ecocriticism interrogates nature in literature within the auspices of literary creativity is to locate the presentation of the reality of how man, who is an aspect of nature himself, copes with his non-human inmates of the ecosystem. Here, it may be rewarding to quote Cheryl Glotfelty, the avowed progenitor of the theory.

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty 1996: xix).

The main relationship between literature and the physical environment is notably explainable in terms of the former’s representation of the latter in a creative architecture that provides miniaturized reality. In other words, the physical environment is represented in literature. However when a literary genre lays emphasis on the geographical topography such that the productive, or counter-productive, activities of man in nature gain stridency in the thematic order of the genre, such is tagged an ecophobia piece of literature, and the analytical necessity of such results in ecocriticism.

Although Glotfelty is tagged a worthy progenitor of the theory of Ecocriticism, the birth of the term could be traced to the American

critic, William Rueckert who in his essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, explains that ecocriticism entails the “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.” In a nutshell, both Glotfelty and Rueckert provided the lead way to modern scholarship in Ecocriticism as they have both established that the theory encourages the study of literature *vis a vis* its duplication of the happenings in its natural ambiance. As a follow-up to Glotfelty and Rueckert’s studies, modern critics like Fenton 2008 provide the initiative that ecocriticism is a notion that examines the “interconnectedness of man and nature”(2). For Fenton for instance, since both man and nature are inextricably connected, the keen understanding of both entities is vital in the study of fiction from an ecocritical perspective.

In the view of Greg Garrard, ecocritics operate with a checklist of questions as specified by Glotfelty. In his word, Garrard states:

Glotfelty goes on to specify some of the questions ecocritics ask, ranging from ‘How is nature represented in this sonnet [literature]?’ through ‘How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?’ to ‘How is science itself open to literary analysis?’ and finally ‘What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?’

Looking through the checklist of questions, one can discover that the aesthetics of some fictional works are framed to incorporate answers to almost all the questions. Some of such fictional works are adequately exemplified by the creative writings of authors from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, particularly those who have made the geopolitical crisis of the region their motifs. Little wonder

Vathana Fenn has appropriated the theory of ecocriticism as indexical in the study of African literary topography.

It is critical to note that, in literary studies, *particularly in Africa*, the field of ecocriticism has recently emerged as an important critical perspective that explains how human beings relate to the environment and or how non-humans are presented in fiction [my italics] (119).

Fenn further establishes that there is a remarkable degree of consensus among scientists and environmentalists that there is a general environmental threat posed to the ecology by modern civilization. Ecocritics, therefore, trace the presentation of these treats to the parentheses of literature. Hence, in her exact words,

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 (114).

The implication of 'not only lays emphasis on the harmony of humanity and nature' indicates that Ecocriticism extends its trajectories to the interest in the likely destructive 'disharmony' that also exists between man and nature. Consequently, to view literature from an ecocritical stance, one must be ready to establish the good, the bad, and the ugly of the environment. Garrad provides the likely angles that literature can adopt, "which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application" to make the environment its focus (ix). The angles include pollution, position, pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, and animals. For the purpose of this study, the angles of pollution, pastoral, and apocalypse are explained.

Pollution

According to Garrad, pollution accounts for all unnatural influences on the ecological system as documented by literature. For instance, in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) there is the notion that in the pre-pollution era,

[t]here was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings and, invoking the ancient tradition of the pastoral, goes on to paint a picture of 'prosperous farms', 'green fields', foxes barking in the hills, silent deer, ferns and wildflowers, 'countless birds' and trout lying in clear, cold streams, all delighted in by those who pass through the town (1962:21).

Carson's fable in *Silent Spring* accounts for images of natural beauty and the rustic harmony of humanity and nature that once existed in primordial times. In fact, the fable starts by presenting, according to Garrad,

a picture of essential changelessness, which human activity scarcely disturbs, and which the annual round of seasons only reinforces. However, pastoral peace rapidly gives way to catastrophic destruction (1).

As Carson's fable progresses in the narrative, a picture of the 'catastrophic destruction' is painted.

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death (23).

This catastrophic destruction in the aftermath of pollution.

Pastoral

Terry Gifford describes the pastoral tradition as "any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (1999:2). It treats as its major theme the retreat from the already overpopulated and heavily cosmopolitan cities which are already laden with obscurities, pollution, labor, and hardship as well as criminalities. This retreat is the reversal of an earlier drift to

the urban centers. Such drift has led to what Lekan Oyegoke tagged *oshodization* of the urban centers, by which he meant the tendency for almost all state capitals in Africa to have become over-crowded like the famous *Oshodi* market in the Lagos state of Nigeria.

Apocalypse

For over 3,000 years there has been the belief that the end of the world is imminent. Most monotheistic religions have documented this projected apocalypse of mankind to moderate human actions. For instance, the Holy Bible documents the apocalypse of the world in the Book of Revelations in which the accounts of the manner of the world's Armageddon, which will eventually annihilate physical existence, are adequately rendered. Today, there also exist distinctive constructions of apocalyptic narratives that entrench many concerns for environmentalism which also trigger the interests of ecocritics. Interestingly, the notion that the world would end one day via its gradual decline has been widespread since ancient civilizations. Similarly in modern science, there is the prognostication that the planet earth will cease to exist in about 4 million years to come because:

1. The sun, which is the source of all primary energies will have emitted all its bodily form through the mass discharge that is reducing its body mass on daily basis;
2. Human activities on the surface of the earth are injurious to the ozone layer which is the membrane-like upper layer of the atmosphere where harmful ultraviolet radiations from the sun are absorbed to prevent mankind from acid rain. It was in the 1980s that scientists realized that industrial pollutants such as CFC were already damaging the ozone layer by perforating it and reducing it into percolatable sheets.

Cases are obvious, with respect to (ii) above, how literature document the effects of the activities of man on his environment.

Although this paper focuses on the Niger Delta literature, it is apt to note that even before the emergence of the literature, a number of African narratives have evolved with thematic contents that laid bare the environmental ecosystem that surrounds the Africans in the pre-colonial days. For instance, in Asare Konandu's *Rebel*, the protagonist expressed concern at the expiration of the pastoral bliss that had existed in the environment where the lands have now refused to yield their increase.

At first, the crops had been reasonably healthy. But each succeeding crop became more meagre. Eventually, it became hardly worth harvesting. Preparing the ground for the seed, keeping down the hostile, obdurate weeds, and gathering the crops – such as they were – taxed the people physically (*Rebel*, 10).

Also in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, there is a narrative design to express the agrarian felicities enjoyed by farmers before the colonial insurrection and several others have served as reasonable precursorial indexes for the narratives of ugly experiences to come in Niger Delta fiction.

Niger Delta Literature: Problematizing with Echophobic Literature

Just like Apartheid themes seemed to sustain South African literature for the very times the program lasted in the country so much that thought of the literature would trigger the (re)presentation of the gruesome experiences of the people, Nigerian literature has some literary landmarks that peculiarize it. Such landmarks are somewhat products of historical antecedents and they have been responsible for the aesthetic form-giving of the literature. For instance, the Nigerian Civil War has created momentous narratives, plays, and poems which their authors have used as an emblematic recast of the *better-forgotten but unforgettable* events of the war. One of the very crucial realities of the war is the fact that the celebrated 1914 Amalgamation, which yoked incompatible territories into one uncontrollable territory, was a ruse intended to cover up the colonialist's shenanigans and ulterior motives. This is why not sooner than immediately after the independence, the purported political *amalgam* started to have its territorial parts burst asunder and the ensuing war divided the country of Nigeria both ethnically and politically.

These ethnic and political diversities are more often reflected in Nigerian literature and today it is possible to view Niger Delta creativity as exhibiting the sentiments of the people who have been blessed by nature and created by their neo-colonial government. To corroborate this stance, we can argue that:

[s]ince the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in 1956, and its exploration since 1958, the region has experienced the paradox of living in wealth and still going hungry. This paradoxical reality has since generated multifaceted political reactions especially as the indigenes of the Niger Delta grapple with survival in a dystopian society that is bereft of form and social balance (Adeseke, 2016:11)

To read Niger Delta literature is to probe into how an average Niger Deltan copes with the realistic ugliness of living in the midst of geographical plenty where the proceeds of the analogous wealth is ungraspable. For instance, there is the paradox that surrounds the ecological fortune of the Niger Delta region – oil – whose discovery could be tagged the genesis of the problem region.

According to Kole Omotoso, in the assumption that “the African writer must deal with the complexity of the nation-state [which is] the product of the [earlier] Pan African struggle...” we are mandated to believe that the brigade of writers writing to protest against the state of affairs in the Niger Delta is doing the right thing (35). This paper thus sets out to conduct an inquiry into how the socio-political realities within the Niger Delta have served as worthy raw materials converted as literary pieces that expound the problems of a people. The texts in focus here are Tanure Ojaide's novel, *The Activist*(2006), with supportive drawings from notable

poems and two plays – J.P. Clark's *Wives Revolt* (1991) and Esiaba Irobi's *The Hangmen Also Die* (1989).

As a prelude to the analysis of the target novel, we can say that Ojaide's *The Activist* is a novel that falls chronologically within the same range of Nigerian literary tradition often known as the 21st century literature like Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), Wale Okediran's *Dreams Die at Twilight* (2001), Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* (2008), Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2007), Bisi Ojediran's *A Daughter for Sale* (2006), and Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007). Because the said period is characterized by socio-economic and political fiasco occasioned by the government's insensitivity to the masses' plights, it serves as an era of prolificity in the turning out of literary pieces that radically project the governmental agencies as callous and enmeshed in the miasma of corruption that has turned many communities into theatres of formless structures. This same point resonates in most contemporary Niger Delta narratives apparently forged with the notion to indicate the Niger Delta region as a microcosm of hardship-ridden ecological and political space that is bereft of form – a microcosm of the pervasive corruption in Nigeria.

The Activist is a novel that explores the eco-sensitive injustices in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Activist is the protagonist of the novel. He is an American returnee who becomes a symbol of intellectualism, patriotism, and a vision for transformation in the embattled Niger Delta. In the novel, as Somtochukwu Metu (2015) suggests,

Ojaide portrays the disillusionment and despondence of the marginalised Niger Deltans due to the decay in their environment. Their embitterment emanates from the games of oil politics, ethnic marginalisation, and environmental predation their leaders play with the wealth of the region (31).

Thus, Ojaide's intention in *The Activist* is presumably to present a montage of true to the life experience of the people of Niger Delta so as to direct the attention of the world to the economic, social, and environmental genocide that looms in the region. To achieve this thematic intention, Ojaide downplays the convention of earlier *avant-garde* narrators, with his outright disregard for the extant formats of narrative point of view, characterization, plot, structure, dialogue, and aesthetics; concentrating, instead, on the message the literary truth he wants to pass across even at the risk of been journalistic. To realize his aim, Ojaide aesthetically weaves facts of history with fiction to recount the plight of the oil-rich Niger Delta area of Nigeria in the 1990s under military dictatorship.

Apparently, the protagonist, the Activist, returns home after his academic stint abroad and becomes disenchanted with the *status quo*. He joins the political movement to effect change and development in his politically-battered and ecologically-impooverished environment. Ojaide creates around the protagonist other characters like Pere, Omagbemi, Chief Ishaka, and Ebi who are equally agents of social transformation to propel him towards his set objectives. Ojaide contrasts his protagonist with other mindless individuals in the novel; individuals who use their

political position to amass wealth for themselves at the expense of the people who they represent. Thus Metu writes again, “the Activist returns to witness the wake of the destructive hurricane as far as the environment is concerned. He feels the anguish of his people and thinks of how to help make their environment” (31). Menu coins a term that can sufficiently explain the thematic thrust of *The Activist* as he suggests the coinage “eco-activism” to capture the ecology-driven activism of the characters who must tackle wrestle the government to a point of yielding to the eco-sensitive insurrections of the Niger Deltans. Ojaide does not just evoke the insurrections from a vacuous space of believability. The encoded insurrections are premised on the note that, as Cyril Obi notes:

In spite of the overwhelming contribution of the oil minority areas of the Niger Delta to Federal Revenues, they have been excluded from direct access to oil revenues, except through federal and ethnic majority benevolence. Consequently, the region is one of the least developed and poorest in the Nigerian State. A number of factors account for this rather unfortunate fate of oil-bearing communities all of which are rooted in the historical development of the Nigerian State. The most significant of this factor to date has been the replacement of agriculture with oil, as the basis of capitalist accumulation and State reproduction in Nigeria. (108).

Obi’s observation is a statement from reality. Such reality is a form of protuberance from the historical antecedence that dates back to the discovery that the Niger Delta region was an oil-rich one. In fact, with the discovery of oil in 1957 in Oloibiri in the present-day Bayelsa, different oil companies began to drill for oil which in turn has polluted the environment thereby usurping people’s ready-made opportunity to practice agriculture. The foregoing, coupled with the government’s failure to extend the rebate of the excavation activities of the oil companies to the people, signal an instance of double jeopardy for them: they cannot practice farming, nor are they reckoned with in the oil schemes.

The novel begins with “A life of Activities” which chronicles the return of the activist and his swerving into a life of human rights advocacy. The novel presents the Activist as a ubiquitous “protest bug” that shows up whenever there is a protest to attract media attention. Unlike what obtains with other novelists like Festus Iyayi and Ayi Kwei Armah who more often present activists that are not drawn from the well-to-do clime, Ojaide presents an activist-protagonist who is economically comfortable and has flown to Europe several times on chartered flights to carry placards against Bell Oil Company (a disguise for Shell Oil Corporation) and the Group of Seven (G7, industrially advanced countries including U.S.A, France, Britain, Germany, and others) over debt relief for Third World countries. He also sees the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as exploiters of developing countries. As the narrator puts it:

The Activist had also been airlifted in a Green Peace Plane from Washington DC to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He identified with the concern of the Green Peace for the environment. Its objectives were in line with his for his Niger Delta birthplace. He had either paid to go to major protests within the United States or had been helped outright for international ones. He was not a rich man for that matter but he knew how to get to a place by Greyhound or Amtrak by negotiating a good bargain farer as early as possible, hence he participated in many big protests (23).

The Activist is thus inspired by his desire to canvass for a safer environmental condition for his birthplace and it is apt to insist that such a desire is born out of sheer determination to evolve a universal change in an ecological space that is bereft of form. To achieve his aim, the activist participates in environmental movements abroad to garner experience and impetus for his designed activism. He questions some aspects of life in the developing world, especially the Niger Delta. He observes that:

Too many women suffer, battery at the hands of their men, and too many helpless women are killed by psychotic men. There is too much oppression of the minority in the name of democracy in many countries. Too many innocent people are convicted for crimes they do not commit (25).

Though the entire scenario painted above may sound somewhat exaggerated, it does not however mean that they are not true, the truth of the situation is that there are disparities in the society. These disparities trouble the Activist and this precisely motivates him into a life of activism. Added to these disparities are the activities of the oil companies operating in the region. Ojaide clearly wants the world to believe that the oil companies, powered by the government, are responsible for all the problems in the Niger Delta.

Like Rachel Carson, Ojaide revisits the pre-pollution *pastoral* Niger Delta to reconnect his readers with the ecological harmony of the space. The protagonist is made to reminisce over his childhood days when the naturalness of the geographical space had not been tampered with.

Whenever my mother wanted to prepare a meal with crayfish, she literally put a pot of water on the fire and took her scooping net, and went to the nearby lake to catch fish. She returns within a half-hour with just enough fish to prepare a delicious palm oil soup. The lake and the wetlands have been filled, first with rubber trees, then with new roads and developments that left the people hungry, diseased, malnourished, and alienated from their roots. Now the oil companies are pouring poisons into them, giving this natural

sustenance of the people a final deathblow (104).

Ojaide seems to justify some of the activities of dubious individuals in the Niger Delta, activities such as bunkering, kidnapping, hostage-taking, touting, and vandalization of oil pipelines which are generally criminal under the law. However within the context of the Niger Delta situation, as portrayed by the narrative at hand, such vices are viewed as proportionate responses to what may be referred to as organized state crime. Thus, the narrative poetics of Ojaide operates on the fact that the author has, as Stephen Kekeghe and Beatrice Orife (2017) educate us,

prepared his tirades to rope in all heartless poachers that obliterate the natural vegetation thereby exposing the inhabitants to health peril. Ojaide reveals that the geophysicists and hydro-engineers that drill the oil in the Niger Delta region are not ignorant of the looming tragedy. They are aware of the environmental hazard that the people are prone to; but because their quest is to garner wealth, they do not feel for the people (5).

The Activist returns home from abroad because of his intention to make a greater impact on his people. His activities can as well be likened to those of Ken Saro Wiwa of the Ogoni Activism of the General Abacha era in Nigeria. Also to take after the likes of Nnamdi Azikwe, he establishes *The Patriot* a newspaper house with the motto – ‘justice and humanity for the people (269). He also aspires to hold a key position in government to serve the people, thereby deciding to contest for the gubernatorial seat, bringing together “his resources in the Delta Cartal, the patriot, and relationship with the Egba boys, the students and the university to wage a vigorous campaign” (313).

The Activist in a clear and simple terms discusses his objectives. His objective is for a new Niger Delta area where all can enjoy the benefits of their God-given resources, using ‘fish’ as a symbol for his campaign. Fish is well known to the people and will not be easily forgotten, unlike other candidates who uses abstract things for their symbols.

The election came and The Activist won, for him is a good time to change the tides of the Niger Delta he:

brought major changes to the state government, he had taken his office as a challenge . . . He restructured the government ministries and agencies . . . He created a Ministry of Environmental and Mineral Matters to deal with the problem of the Niger Delta . . . harness its natural resources and also to clean the polluted soil, water and air and put out fires from gas flares and oil blowout . . . The newly elected governor brought back Dennis Ishaka from Amsterdam . . . and appointed Dennis the Commissioner of the new Ministry (318, 319).

Ojaide reiterates his ecoactivist narrative design by creating very supportive characters for his protagonist – the activist. All the other activist-minded characters in the novel exhibit a similar apathy for the environmental injustices that are pervasive.

Another character whose attitude is similar to the Activist is Pere. Pere is the representative of the average “area boys”. Within the context of Ojaide’s novel, Pere represents not just a social miscreant that steals and dispossesses people of their possessions, but also a mind constantly adjusting to the dictate of the environment. Pere is an ex-convict at the Maximum Security Prison on Okere Road. Although his partnership with the Activist to hoard fuel during fuel scarcity is clearly an anti-progressive action, however, Ojaide uses him as an aider of transformation in the Niger Delta, albeit operating from the window of vices to evolve vicissitudes of fortunes.

Through the creation of the character Omogbemi, one is tempted to inquire whether Ojaide is justifying students’ cultism. Omagbemi is the son of Dr. Mukoro, the Activist’s fellow lecturer at the Niger Delta State University. He is a cult member, and Ojaide portrays him also an agent of change. As Omagbemi explains to justify students’ cultism:

With time people in their fears, in whatever they do, they try to take it on the society that denies them opportunities. That’s what is happening today, a soldier walks through corpses on a battlefield without being afraid, that’s our position. War is war! (187).

From the foregoing, rather than posit that Ojaide is encouraging cultism, one can appropriately conclude that he tries to raise an argument for why the governmental insensitive structure is responsible for why cultism would continue to thrive. Conversely, to prove that he does not support cultism, he uses Omagbemi’s father as his mouthpiece.

But whom are you fighting? Why do you fight the same society you are a part of rather than those exploiting you? Why fight other victims rather than the oppressors? It is a big contradiction. (187)

Not minding that all these characters (The Activist, Pere, and Omogbemi) are somewhat guilty of causing unrest in the political interpretation of the word itself, Ojaide does not ascribe culpability to them perhaps because he wants the world to see how much the environment has changed the psyche of these characters, and by extension, the Niger Delta people. As Omagbemi rightly said, people often “take it on the society that denies them opportunities”. Perhaps this is the message that Ojaide wants his novel to present. Ojaide wants the world to know that the people of this region are products of the environment which has lost its natural essence because of the scavenging forces that place a premium on oil excavation irrespective of the damaging effects of their activities. Thus, the armed struggle, bunkering, and hostage-taking are seeming justifiable products of the environmental damage.

Perhaps the psychological quandary of the Niger Delta is

adequately captured by Chief Ishaka when he asks rhetorically that “Oil brought wealth, but how are we better off without farming, fishing, and hunting that are no longer viable?” (138). Such quandary exhibited by Chief Isaka is a statement of the universal condition of the people who, as already noted, have been rendered jobless by the environment which has, since Oloibiri discovery, been adulterated.

Let us indicate here that there are two narrative voices in *The Activist*. The first is the narrator’s voice which operates in the objective and critical mode. The second voice is the authorial intrusion which represents Ojaide’s ideological stance on the extant problems. Throughout the novel, there is an admixture of these two voices within the narrative architecture. It is therefore instructive to observe that while the narrator’s voice presents the Niger Delta situation from an analytical point of view, the authorial voice tries to balance and counter the narrator’s voice so that the readers can have two sides of the story to draw a conclusion from. With this narrative style, Ojaide cannot be said to be biased and grossly sentimental.

We may conclude on Ojaide’s novel, no doubt, that it has an environment-centered approach to the issues of the Niger Delta more than other interests. The novel posits that the environment, as re-conditioned by the inordinate jostling for oil, is the problem of the people. The problem has simply snowballed into those of poverty, economic dependency, insecurity, displacement (psychological and physical), and sexual indecency as captured by novels like Kane Agary’s *Yellow Yellow*. It, therefore, means that environmental complication is at the heart of Ojaide’s *The Activist*, and this is a statement that the novel ranks among the technophobic narratives whose contents are targets for ecocriticism.

It suffices to extend the discussion in this paper to other genres, even at the risk of giving lesser attention as much as Ojaide’s novel has enjoyed. In “Oil Politics and Violence in Postcolonial Niger Delta Drama”, Oyeh Otu and Obumneme Anasi (2017) affirm that “Oil is the dominant motif, defining metaphor, and most importantly, site of contestation and oppositionality in postcolonial Niger Delta literature, particularly in the 21st century” (171). Interestingly, this affirmation sustains the argument that the portrayal of the environmental “bad” and “ugly” of the Niger Delta is universal to all genres of literature – Prose, Drama, and Poetry – that emanate from, or on, the literary topography of the region. For instance,

postcolonial drama on the Niger Delta reveals how oil politics has eroded the values of the communities, broken the communal bonds such that things have fallen apart and brothers and sisters are fighting one another while enemies within and without having taken complete control of oil resources and the environment are degraded with impurity (Oyeh Otu and Obumneme Anastasi, 172).

It seems Franz Fanon foresaw the present environmental holocaust in the Niger Delta region when he noted the rate at which colonial forces infiltrated the ranks of the “natives” destabilize communities

and weaken the anti-colonial/imperialism struggle. For Fanon, this simply signaled “the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (Fanon 122). By “unfair advantages” Fanon had referred to the self-governing opportunity handed to the African, in this case, Nigerian, to evolve his own colonialism-free government to steer the affairs of his country. Unfortunately, the aftermath of this for Nigeria is the evolution of a half-baked polity that has transmogrified into the postcolonial charade that has brought back the Imperialist, now the oil dealer, to his former colony. When we do a survey of Nigerian drama on the Niger Delta we notice a “disturbing paradigm shift between the pre-colonial/colonial and the postcolonial” (Otu and Anasi, 172). J.P. Clark’s *Ozidi* and Elechi Amadi’s *Isiburu* can adequately represent the plays with pre-colonial content. In them, we can see very tranquil and cohesive Niger Delta communities where “deviant behaviour or moral aberration does not just constitute offence or crime punishable by society, but more importantly is a breach on cosmic harmony of the society” (Otu and Anasi, 172). What later became the major commitment for the postcolonial plays – oil – was not the major issue in the plays with the pre-colonial contents. In fact, from Clark’s *The Wives Revolt* (1991), the politics of drama stages became politics of oil. As a confirmation of this Clarks commitment in *The Wives Revolt* structures a gender-based argument that traces the societal disharmonies to the oil politics. It plays out that the money received as payout from an oil company becomes an issue that sparks out feminine revolution. The money is to be shared among the elders, men, and women. Because the elders are all men, Koko, the wife of the community leader, leads a remote against the distribution injustice which obviously has short-changed her fold.

Okoro: ... Since you women feel so incensed by what you say is an unjust distribution of the proceeds from our oil industry, why don’t you turn your anger upon the government?

Koko: What government? Government that is so far away, and has no face?

Okoro: It is there in Benin, and it is there in Lagos. That’s where all the money goes, a great part of it on its way to other places, all far from the oil fields. God, go up there and spit your fire at Government and President and see whether you won’t be snuffed out as so many sputtering candles. (15-16)

Elsewhere, Okoro is seen conveying the Council’s message and from the content of the message, one could get the bone of contention. In fact, we know that the men are on the defensive when Okoro says:

As for the original matter of oil company money that started all this fire, let it be known here and now that it was not such a big sum of money. Certainly, not so big that it was going to change the condition of our lives permanently for the better. It has left the poor, poor, and the rich perhaps a little richer as our

oil continues to flow to enrich other people across the country (61-62).

The “oil company money” notwithstanding, poverty still ravages Niger Delta populace, and no doubt “the paradox of the problem of poverty is that even the Niger Delta region that produces over 90% of Nigeria’s oil wealth is experiencing pathetic and endemic poverty today” (Emmanuel et al, 225).

As sequels to the plays produced by the likes of Clark, more radical plays, by 21st Century playwrights, evolved: Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), Chika C. Onu’s *Dombraye*(2010), Isaac Ogezi’s *Under a Darkling Sky*(2012), Uzo Nwamara’s *Dance of the Delta*(2010), Tess Onwueme’s *The She Said It*(2002) Ahmed Yerima’s *Hard Ground*(2005), Eni Jologho Umuko’s *The Scent of Crude Oil*(2010), and Oyeh Otu’s *Shanty Town*(2011), these plays dramatize how oil politics has turned the Niger Delta into a desert, and war zone. These plays have come to terms with the reasoning of Tanure Ojaide in his article titled, “Examining Canonisation in Modern African Literature” in which he notes that “every literary canon exists in the context of the people’s overall experience and aesthetic values. Thus, the African literary canon is related to the African experience, which has strong cultural and historical underpinnings” (4). Benedict Binebai supports this claim when he also notes:

The playwright like journalists has a strong inspiration to write plays from his experiences in society. Like prophets, he writes about the ills he sees men do and call for their condemnation. Like the school teacher, the plays have a pedagogic influence on society and like the religious priest, the artistic universe he creates is designed to teach some severe moral messages. In a society where corruption, Social Darwinism, and several shades of evils hold sway, the playwright has a responsibility to appropriate his plays to achieve social reconstruction (1).

An example of this inspiration to write plays, noted by Binebai, can be noticed in the way there exists a nexus between the environmental history of the Niger Delta region and the modern theatrical window of the creative space the region. We can cite Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* as an example. In the play, Otu and Anasi write,

...the conflict in Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* is caused by compensation money. What we see at work in the play, as in all the plays studied here, is the politics to corrupt, destabilize and control: a Nigerian version of the colonial of policy of divide and rule. Both oil companies and the Federal Government use the same policy to keep Niger Delta peoples and their communities in perpetual denigrating poverty (174).

The story in *Hangmen Also Die* revolves around seven young men whose lives are to be terminated by means of the guillotine because

they murdered Chief Erekosima, in cold blood. The dramatic turnaround occurs when Yekini, the hangman, aggressively refuses to hang the young men who are to be murdered. This refusal unfolds the events that lead to the action of the young terrorist via a flashback which narrates the story of the foundation of the Suicide Squad. The Suicide Squad is a gang of a bunch of educated criminals, who have been dispossessed and displaced, who have resolved to vent their anger on the very society that failed to give them a decent living with celebrated violence. The Suicide Squad, led by Tarila Iganima alias R. I. P, has strong faith in crime, criminality, and violence to eke a living for themselves. The squad confronts and abducts, Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, who dances home after receiving a chieftaincy title, for embezzling three million Naira. This money is meant to be the compensation money paid to the common populace of Izon state for the devastation of their livelihoods by oil spillage. Erekosima after his abduction by the Suicide Squad confesses that he spent half a million naira on his coronation as the Amatemeso of Izon State. He also reveals that he paid some money for the educational pursuit of his children abroad due to the fallen standard of education in Nigeria. Chief Erekosima is hanged from a tree having been found guilty in the makeshift court of the Suicide Squad. Interestingly, Irobi’s story seems to have served as a forecast for a yet-to-be-realized event which was later to serve as a very grave one in the history of the Region. Consequently, the story of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni leader, who was executed by the Abacha Junta in 1995 alongside eight others, seemed echoed in Irobi’s play. As history has it, four Ogoni chiefs, who were allegedly corrupt, were brutally murdered by Ogoni irate youths. This sparked a negative reaction from the government and consequently, Saro-Wiwa and the other eight were found guilty, perhaps because they have been the forerunners of the Ogoni struggles since 1993. History has it that although Saro-Wiwa and his accomplices were not in the scenes of the gruesome murder of the corrupt chiefs by the youth, the Nigerian Federal Government, anchored by General Abacha the President, manipulated the court procedures and eventually got the Ogoni nine executed on November 10, 1995. Irobi’s play seems to give way to a yet to be unfolded event, somewhat prophetic of the struggles to come. Irobi’s hangman, Yekini, examines the situation rationally.

... You see, some time ago, the Federal Government gave the citizens of this state, which as you know is a riverine state, the sum of three million naira as compensation money for the oil spillage which has ruined their farms, their homes, and their lives. But the man they killed, Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a commissioner for local government, rural development, and chieftaincy affairs, connived with his councilors and local government chairman to confiscate the 3 million naira. The councilors took one million and shared it among themselves. The local government chairman shared one million. The commissioner himself, one million. No single citizen, no matter how wretched, got a single

kobo. That was when those young men stepped
in ... (*Hangmen* 12-13).

Yekini is Irobi's mythic creation whose reasoning is only limited to the aesthetic world of creativity. In fact, the character merely serves as a forerunner for the hangmen to come in the real world to claim the lives of nine men. For the Ogoni nine,

[t]he prison in Port Harcourt was selected as a place of execution. Although the government wanted to carry out the sentences immediately, it had to wait two days for makeshift gallows to be built. Within hours of the sentences being upheld, nine coffins were taken to the prison, and the following day a team of executioners was flown in from Sokoto to Port Harcourt (:<http://em.wikipedia.org/wik>).

Unfortunately, hangmen who were like mere robots were flown in to do the job of silencing the activist. Today, the hanging of Saro-Wiwa is now history for literary practitioners to draw from. The only surprising thing, perhaps to those who do not know how literature can evolve from the mythical archetypes that proceed from the autochthonous realm of life, is how Irobi's creativity can equate to a yet-to-be-lived experience. Irobi wrote *The Hangmen* in 1989 and that same year, coincidentally, Saro-Wiwa had written a short story, "Africa Kills her Sun". In "Africa Kills her Sun", Saro-Wiwa seemed to have foreshadowed his own execution. This definitely has authenticated the fact that the artist is like Nostradamus, the man who saw tomorrow. From Irobi's story, we know that in the Niger Delta experience

... forces working against the people are not only external (i.e. multinational oil companies representing imperial powers), the worst enemies of the people and the region are enemies within – the insensitive government at the center, state and local governments in the region as well as chiefs and perverse elements who control the local communities. These enemies within are "the get-rich-quick middle class" (Fanon 141) who have formed formidable alliances with multinational companies to destroy the lives and ecological resources of their people. It is the politics of these enemies within that has made Niger Delta communities, seen as a unit, a house divided (176).

In "Poetry and the Niger Delta Environment: An Eco-Critical Perspective" Fortress Isaiah Ayinuola and Abiodun-Eniayekan Eugenie (2012) provide a clue to the eco-sensitive nature of the Niger Delta poems. According to them, the poems of the modern poets conspicuously reflect the minatory essence of the environment. Adding that "based on [the] dismal socio-economic landscape, Nigerian writers have risen to the occasion... [that] brings to the fore the environmental state of the Niger delta" (3). We may as well start our brief discussion of poetry with Ojaide.

In "Hunger", anthologized under *Let the Honey Run*, Ojaide

echoes:

Pentecostal concerts burnt down the primeval
grove
There, they believed, witches metamorphosed
into owls
They did not even know what animal they had
become
When they were born again, living in self-
renunciation
The developers tore down the forest that
covered us
With green foliage, trashed the natural
canopies

In the lines of the poem, Ojaide resonates his awareness as an environmental activist by bringing ecological issues into his poetic narration. Like he does in *The Activist*. Ojaide condemns the governmental greed and indecorous encroachments that destroy the agrarian splendor of the region, all in the name of oil excavation.

However, before the emergence of poems from the likes of Ojaide, the Niger Delta's environment has always been portrayed by poets like Dennis Osadebay and Gabriel Okara as a distinct ecological bliss, a presentation that is a radical departure from what obtains in the poems of contemporary poets whose literary output is rather pessimistic. For instance, in "The Call of the River Nun" Gabriel Okara presents the River Nun as that which gives him the excitement of sweet memories:

I hear your call!
I hear it far away;
I hear it break the circles
Of these crouching hills.
I hear your lapping call!
Listening where river birds hail
Your silver-surfaced flow ...
(K. Senanu & T. Vincent. 2003, 103-104)

Okara celebrates River Nun as proceeding from a fountain of peace. Conversely, x-raying the current predicaments experienced in the Niger Delta Region, Ojaide in "At the Kaiama Bridge" radically opines:

I see the oil-blackened current suffocating
Mami Wata and her retinue of water maids;
They leave fast the inhospitable dominion
For the freedom and health of the open sea...
Oil spillage has fuelled water hyacinths
To multiply astronomically across rivers.
Refugee golds are taking the last route
Before the entire waterway is clogged ...
At the wobbling Kaiama Bridge that the Delta
Together, I see a procession of oil-soaked
water spirits
Wailings their way out. No boats of fishermen
plying
The waterways; no regatta and no swimmers
insight (33-34)

Ojaide in this poem confirms that through a passage of years, oil spillage has reconditioned the Deltan waters and one is not surprised that the River Nun of Okara is now a shadow under oil spillage battered beyond recognition. Several years after Okara's "The Call of the River Nun", Ibiwari Ikiriko (2000) writes in *The Oily Tears* with absolute disgust, regret, and disappointment on the same River Nun. In Ikiriko's poem,

Okara's silver-surfaced Nun is no more
Now effluent – effete, sludge – silvered
Its slop lumbers to the sea
Rendering brackish zones barren
Like poisoned ditch water (26).

The thematic difference in the experiences of these poets about the same River Nun is owing to oil exploration in the Niger delta which has destroyed a considerable part of the natural environment. The region lost the opportunity to practice agriculture and fish in River Nun. It has lost the natural beauty and attraction that inspired Okara to celebrate the river. The aftermath of "poisoned ditch water" is the economic dehydration suffered by the people. At the instance of the economic collapse. There is that occupational inhibition of the people especially as the landscape which is their source of occupation has collapsed to scrambling for oil. In "Goat Song", Ojaide explains the deforestation and the endangerment of the meadows as a result of the persistent search for oil. Perhaps because of the foregoing, he laments the self-initiated Armageddon:

The wind laments, its fans are burning out;
The trees have been shaved off their coiffures...
The big family is dying out— irokos fall; game
Leave in droves, and humans flee to hunger
Soon the whole landscape will be a cemetery
South-South of the carousing palace of the king(10-11)

Conclusion

This paper set out to prove that Niger Delta Literature is an ecophobic, eco-active and eco-sensitive one. It furthers the extant discussions on the Niger Delta situation as documented by literature. By applying the theoretical position of Ecocriticism as a critical tool, the work draws from selected works topically from Tanure Ojaide who can be considered as one of the most, if not the most, eco-active Niger Delta writers that dedicate their literary inputs to the portrayal of the ecology-based problems of the Niger Delta people. To encourage a near extensive reading across genres, the study does not limit its scope to Ojaide's *The Activist*. It also justifies its position by drawing significantly, albeit briefly, from notable plays and poems to buttress the fact that the dilapidating ecology of the Niger Delta enjoys universal treatment in the literature drawn from, or drawn on, the region. There is no gainsaying the fact that multiple similar researches have evolved before the present study and they played very significant roles in its design and well-formedness. In its analysis, the essay allows a glimpse into the pre-excavation Niger Delta as well as the aftermath of the oil boom. Although the aftermath of oil excavation purportedly brought about disunity among the Niger Deltans, and disharmony within the ecosystem, it interestingly serves as a means

of thematic unification for emergent literary piece and this paves way for the application of one single theory – Ecocriticism, a very handy theory when it becomes mandatory to revise the Niger Delta literary canons without submitting them to any of the dominant critical cliché.

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