

# AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF TANURE OJAIDE'S *TALE OF THE HARMATTAN* AND GILBERT OGBOWEI'S *MATILDA*

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## Abstract

The portrait of a ravished young woman captures the natural environment of Niger Delta environment despoiled by the activities of multinational oil companies. In spite of the image of the sexually-violated woman as is aptly captured in the ecological engagements of such poets as Tanure Ojaide, Gilbert Ogbowei and others, available scholarly essays on their poetry have not focused on the ecofeminists elements in their collections. These essays have examined different perspectives, especially; the ecomarxists' concern. This present paper therefore, examines ecofeminists manifestations in Ojaide's *Tale of the Harmattan* and Ogbowei's *Matila*. The Ecofeminism theory examines the relationship between nature and women. The basic assumption of this theory is that women and nature suffer the same fate in a patriarchal society. The study reveals that both poets explore the deleterious state of the Niger Delta environment from an ecofeminist perspective. In both poetry collections, both poets capture the degraded Niger Delta environment through the image of a ravished woman. It is the recommendation of this paper that more studies be done the impact of industrial activities on women of the region.

**Keyword:** ecofeminism, Tanure Ojaide, Gilbert Ogbowei

## Introduction

There is an interlock between women and nature in most African traditions. In these traditions, women are associated with

nature and perceived to be gentle, tender, loving, caring and beautiful. Their image about nature is motherhood, which should be revered, respected and treated with sanctity. The case is not different in Nigerian cosmology. For instance, in the Yoruba pantheon, Oshun, also spelled Osun, an [Orisha Yoruba Nigeria](#) (Bayyinah Jeffries, para. 1). She is regarded as one of the most potent “Orishas”, and like other deities, she exhibits human traits including conceit, resentment, and jealousy. The Igbo cosmology follows the same pattern: Ala is said to be the Earth Goddess or Mother Earth. (Elizabeth Ikechi, Noor Rohimmi, and Rosli Talif, 214).

The belief is similar among the IZONS of the Niger Delta. In the IZON pantheon, *Woyin* or Tamara is believed to be a female Creator of the universe. Most of the words which refer to the Supreme Being are therefore feminine (IHD, 5). *Woyin* means 'Our mother' from whom the IZON ask for blessings in life; while Tamara means 'She that created us.' The Creator is also called Zibara, 'Goddess of prophecy,' divination who is often called upon along with the Creative deity Tamara.

In spite of these obvious significations in most cultures, nature or women are not given their godly status by man due to the patriarchal tendency that exists in most African societies. Consequently, nature suffers all forms of inhuman treatments from degradation to exploitation. Ecofeminists consider such treatments as products of a patriarchal society. To them, nature is feminine and should be treated with reverence. They further argue that nature and women globally suffer the same fate daily.

This essay examines Tanure Ojaide's *Tale of the Harmattan*, and Gilbert Ogbowei's *Matila* from the perspective of ecofeminism, an aspect to which scholars on these writers have paid skeletal attention. The paper examines in the poetry of the above duo the metaphorization of the Niger Delta environment as a woman that is constantly violated through the activities of man.

## Review of Related Scholarship

Ecofeminist examinations of the Niger Delta's peculiar situation have not received significant attention by literary scholars. Much of the literary works have instead applied Eco-Marxism in their literary engagements.

In their paper, Luke Amadi, Mina Ogbanga, and James Agena note that the feminist environmentalist debate examines potential connections between women and environmental issues like inequality (Abstract, 369) and that one of the most urgent global issues at the centre of this debate is climate change. They also note that the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) raises global policy awareness on the realities of climate change vulnerability.

In light of the aforementioned factors, particularly the Niger Delta, they suggest the need to investigate feminist environmental challenges. These factors include the recent escalation of environmental catastrophes, harmful effects of oil resource exploitation by multinational corporations (MNCs), pollution, gas flaring, acid rain, sea level rise, ozone layer depletion, global warming, and related pressures. This is because research has revealed that feminism-related topics are typically handled orally without any practical or performance support. Thus, the attempt of ecofeminists, according to Amadi et al, is to speak for the sisterhood of womanhood. They write:

What we have attempted to do here is to advocate for novel policy discourse on feminist environmentalism to mitigate climate change vulnerability. Poor policy discourse in this direction vitiates the status of women and intensifies their vulnerability to climate change and disempowerment from their mode of subsistence. Existing policy documents such as the Niger Delta Master Plan did not meaningfully prioritize feminist environmentalism. No singular policy document till data has been provided (369).

In actuality, gender gaps continue to rank among the most severe and ubiquitous of all inequities. It should be mandatory for significant oil

extraction stakeholders, such as Western multinational oil firms, to adopt environmentally friendly practices. According to them:

From an ecofeminist perspective, women are considered as semiotized nature, where both have the same trait of being the object of exploitation and pillage from an exploitative force. This is according to Kenneth Chukwu, U.K., and Chris Onyema. Humans often rely on technology, civilization, and industry to degrade and destroy nature. (124)

While man uses socioculturally unbalanced structural structures to exploit and demean women.

The implication of the above is that women are endangered species that men prey upon. This implies that the multinationals are metaphors of the patriarchal society that dominates and exploits the female gender. Chukwu and Oyeama through the use of personifications, raise the status of the Niger Delta environment to women that are marginalized and oppressed in a male centred society. They did so to draw the attention of the reader to the plights of the people. Like a mother, the earth feeds and nurses her children with love and care; yet, this love is not reciprocated by the same people she has fed. They resort to abuse and exploitation of her tender, fragile and soft nature. The Niger-Delta's womanization, which makes the reader feel more empathy and sympathy because they see her as a person who is exploited, deprived of her rights, and dehumanized, is what is most notable and significant in this situation. Due to her maternal character, which is equated with love, she nevertheless extends pity and forgiveness to all of her exploiters in spite of this.

Writing on Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* from the standpoint of ecofeminism, Florence Orabueze asserts that Agary continues the legacy of holding multinational corporations accountable for their sinister activities on the Niger Delta's landscapes. She takes it a step further, though, and metaphorizes how men devalue the woman's body (96).

The Niger Delta, Port Harcourt, and Lagos are all locations for the book's setting. The objective of concealing the location of Zilayefa's hamlet, where an oil leak has destroyed agricultural and aquatic life, is to highlight how commonplace this problem is in communities where oil firms prospect for and drill oil. Despite making the assertion, they have no evidence that they are host communities because they are so unidentified.

Other natural resources, according to Oruabueze, are lost as a result of the destruction of the ecology of the anonymous village, which serves as a model for the other villages, because the villagers continue to lose "the creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, and gas flares" (97). "The peasants are subjected to unimaginable agony and poverty", she continues, "despite the fact that their land and water supply the bulk of the country's riches: "The teachers are due their salaries, there is no power in the villages, and the schools lack a functioning library. Even when there are scholarships available, the villagers are unaware of them and do not know how to apply for them" (97).

Because of the lack of these basic amenities and the conflicts and violence that engulf the village, Zilayefa wants to escape to the city in order to save herself from sudden death.

Although the beginning of Agary's book depicts an oil spill in an unnamed Izon village, it soon becomes clear that the menfolk dominate and degrade the Niger Delta women, as symbolized by the protagonist.

Oruabueze comes to the conclusion that dating men who are old enough to be their dads, like the protagonist does, is another hardship that females must endure. She meets Sergio, a Spanish businessman, whose age she summarises as being "between forty-five and fifty" compared to her own age of seventeen, since she feels caged in the town and wants to escape. Even though the girls are prepared and eager to wed white men even when they are older than their fathers, there is still racial discrimination and prejudice present in this

union due to the fact that black women are only allowed to marry white men "under native law and customs" (97).

Composing in response to Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway*, Ikechi et al., observe that:

The locals (politicians, government officials, and elders in the community) as well as Western Oil Company employees in the village rule, control, and exploit both nature and women in this narrative. As they observe what happens to women and nature while using them for their chauvinistic and cultural ends, men control both of them in the story. Allen Avenue in Lagos, a renowned thoroughfare tainted by several obscene actions, is where the book begins on this note. In addition to the unrestrained commercial activity on Allen Avenue, other factors that contribute to street pollution include the market's pathogens, noise from cars, and the continual usage of noisy and problematic generators. (218)

The information provided by Ikechi et al. makes it clear that there is environmental contamination on a physical, spiritual, and mental level. The characters' minds are disturbed by the loudness, and they are exposed to social evils by the illegal profit-making activities like prostitution and the numerous hotels: "It makes sense that Father, a normal Lagos guy, can control Mama, who continuously drinks, falls, and dalliances with other women in the neighbourhood" (218).

The novel, according to Olubunmi Ashaolu, has two distinct spatial settings: a rural area that is a den of poverty, food shortage, filth, dirty water, and land that is heavily looted; and Port Harcourt, a city that shows the comfort and wealth enjoyed by male characters who are White aliens and Nigerian businessmen who view the local women as objects of pleasure. She plays stereotypically feminine roles such as widowed wives and single moms with limited prospects for the future. Without referring to the community by name, it depicts a small-scale version of Niger Delta towns where women struggle to make ends meet among oil spills and severely contaminated rivers with extinct

ecosystems. Young girls rarely participate in educational or developmental programs when there are none in place. Ashaolu discusses the impact of the oil boom on Niger Delta residents however, with specific focus on the female characters. She depicts a society of women scrambling for survival, women whose fate lies in the hands of a few people that control the destiny of everybody. She condemns this harsh treatment on women and the environment by men, especially the aliens who exploit the weakness of the women in the village to their advantage. It is obvious from her analysis that most of the women are “baby mamas”, widows and single girls who struggle alone to survive in a hostile environment.

The review shows that skeletal studies have examined the Niger Deltans plights from an ecofeminist angle, except for Ojaide’s *Tale of the Harmattan* and Ogbowei’s *Matilda* that have not received similar criticism even though both are writers from the Niger Delta. Thus, the thrust of this paper is to examine the aforementioned texts from an ecofeminist dimension.

### **Theoretical Framework: Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism looks at how women and the environment are connected. In 1974, Françoise D'eaubonne, a French feminist, created the phrase (Kathryn, Miles 1). Judi Bari, Greta Gaard, Sallie McFague, Carolyn Merchant, Mary Amaellor, Maria Mies, Adrian Parr, Val Plumwood, et al. are further supporters of the idea. The basic feminist principles of gender equality, revaluing non-patriarchal or nonlinear systems, and a worldview that respects nature and all living things are all used by ecofeminism. Due to their vulnerability as components of nature, it promotes the holistic care of all living things. Every living creature is viewed by ecofeminists as an endangered species that has to be conserved and safeguarded; not the other way around. Furthermore, ecofeminism adds both commitment to the environment and an awareness of the interlock between women and nature. Its major thrust is to advance the idea that life in nature is maintained through cooperation and mutual care.

Ecofeminism also brings a devotion to the environment and an understanding of how women and nature are intertwined. Its main goal is to propagate the notion that collaboration and mutual care are essential to maintaining life in nature.

They all claim that the separation between women and nature is a result of male supremacy. According to Miles, this worldview highlights how patriarchal or male-dominated society treats both nature and women. To show how societal paradigms unfairly dominate women and environment, ecofeminists investigate the impact of gender categories in this context. The philosophy also argues that these standards provide an inadequate understanding of the world, and its proponents promote an alternative worldview that values the planet and women as holy creatures and accepts all life as deserving of respect.

A series of symposiums and seminars held in the United States by a group of educated and trained women in the late 1970s and early 1980s gave rise to the modern ecofeminist movements. They got together to talk about how feminism and ecology may be used to promote respect for both nature and women. They were further inspired by the idea that males had dominated both nature and women due to a long-standing historical connection between the two. They also note that males were typically portrayed as rational and organized, able to govern the use and development of women and nature, whereas women and nature were commonly portrayed as chaotic, irrational, and in need of control (Miles, 3). Ecofeminists contend that this structure has produced a hierarchical arrangement that gives males authority and permits the exploitation of both women and the environment. Early ecofeminists came to the conclusion that in order to alleviate either constituency's predicament, the communal status of the two would need to be undone.



## Ecofeminism in Tanure Ojaide's *Tale of the Harmattan* and Gilbert Ogbowei's *Matilda*

Ojaide's *Tale of the Harmattan* is divided into three sections, each of which focuses on the problems facing the Niger Delta. In "At the Kaiama Bridge", the poet brings to the fore how oil activities have affected the dwellings of the water goddess of the Izon, popularly called *Beni Otu* or *Mami wata*. This earth goddess is believed among the Izon to bring wealth and prosperity to people, especially her worshippers. Thus, it is believed that when one comes in contact with this water spirit, wealth and riches visit such a one. Ojaide bemoans their retreat into the ocean as a result of the filthy and contaminated nature of the river:

**I see them retreat, flotillas of river spirits  
Who for centuries brought their spectacle in town  
In yearly masquerades-they retreat seaward  
What becomes of us without their presence? (Ojaide, 33).**

The poet observes that before the oil exploration activities, these goddesses would bring their spectacles to town; that is, they would make appearances, and people would see them. These goddesses are very beautiful spectacle. But due to the level of seismic activities, they have ceased to appear before people to bring fortune. This is because it is believed that seeing these goddesses symbolizes good fortune. No wonder, the poet persona laments their absence.

Furthermore, the poet persona laments that prior to this time, they presented themselves as guests to people in this part of the world. But as a result of constant drilling activities, they have returned to the deep sea where they have no such disturbances. These feminine spirits are fond of having conferences with man from time immemorial, but lately, drilling activities by man have deprived them of that fellowship: "They can no longer feel secure in the drilling wetland that has long served as a venue for the Congress of Life" (Ojaide, 33). Ojaide presents man's activities of multinational oil companies as very hostile to nature represented in the feminine spirits, who for ages, have had

congresses with man. Ecofeminists, will interpret the disturbance of nature symbolized by the feminine spirits as oppression of nature. The goal of ecofeminists is to promote women's freedom by challenging social and economic structures that transform all facets of existence into a market culture that now even infiltrates the womb (Ikechi, et al., 215).

The next line of the poem still reiterates the departure of the water spirits as a result of the noise from seismic activities: "All with the property of the land gone into the water/To relieve themselves of the scathing noise above/The waters have turned to a poisonous brew (Ojaide.33).

The poet persona again laments that these goddesses of wealth have returned to their abodes with the wealth of men because of the noisy terrain. More so, because the waters have become so poisonous for them to live. Ojaide observes that despite efforts by the people to stop this injustice against their goddess of wealth, it has continued to exist. In fact, according to him, he himself has once seen these water spirits suffocating with their comity of spirits in their attempt to have conferences with the people of Kaiama along the river bank. According to him "the oil-black current suffocating Mami Wata and her retinue water maids" (33). Due to this ugly stain of the oil, they immediately "leave fast the inhospitable dominion for the freedom and health of the open sea" (33). Their leaving implies man's self-denial of the largess from and bonding with the water spirits. Ojaide concludes in the last stanza that:

At the wobbling Kaiama Bridge that holds the Delta  
Together. I see a procession of oil-soaked water spirits  
Wailing their way out. No boats of fishermen plying  
The waterways; no regatta and no swimmers in the sight.  
(34)

The poem ends on a note of pity and emotion. This manifests in the action of the goddesses wailing that they have no peace in the previously accommodating waters, where they come in their usual manner to have conferences with fishermen and swimmers. They can

no longer find any in the river because the water is not good for fishing as well as swimming, hence express disappointment, crying out. Ojaide here seems to reiterate the fact that the oppression of the environment translates to tampering with human and nature intercourse as even human and non-human inhabitants of rivers are denied contact with the water that have become polluted.

Similarly, in “Swimming in a waterhole”, Ojaide again laments the destruction of nature by oil exploration activities. The poem opens with a flashback to the immediate past how they use the rivers as their refuse sites. According to him, parents were very much aware, so in case of any missing child, the river becomes the first place of contact before informing the town-crier. But the story is different today: “We grew up to love rivers and lakes” ...every parent knew where first to look for a missing child/before alerting the town-crier or beating the drum (Ojaide, 36). The poet brings to memory his childhood experience which was the case with every child then: the river was their games centre. After school, every child went straight to the river and spent the rest of the day swimming until their “eyes turn red” because it was not poisonous, but fresh. This was the pristine Niger Delta without oil exploration activities.

But the story is different today because “...there are no fish, no water spirits born by current/no Mami Wata and others to share the salt of life” (Ojaide, 37). And because these goddesses have been chased away by activities of man, what you see in these abandoned waters are caterpillars and other monsters who “bring the swimmer down without using a reward. (36). This implies that prior to this time, the rivers protected fishermen and swimmers because of the presence of the Mami Wata (mermaids) and other spirits. Here, Ojaide, metaphorizes nature (Mami water or mermaid) as a mother that protected the human inhabitants of the riverine environment in the past. Before oil exploration, fishermen and swimmers who got drowned in the rivers and lakes did not die, but were ferried to the shore by the *saisai beinmo*, a water goddess whose assignment is to save the lives of people on water. This re-echoes John Pepper Clark’s

assertion that an Izon man does not die in water: "Ibobo: Not many will believe that when the story is told. And you know as well as I do that an Ijaw man's death, especially by water, Drags like ivy" (114).

But the case is different today: monsters and caterpillars have turned these rivers and lakes into danger zones because oil exploitation and the attendant environmental degradation have forcefully dislocated the water spirits who are feminine to the deep sea where they no longer have interaction with man.

In *Matilda*, Ogbowei, like ecofeminist poets, engages environmental concerns from a feministic angle. *Matilda* is a collection of eighty-seven love and nature poems that handle issues of the environment. The poet in this collection expresses his love for his environment. He depicts the environment as a woman with extraordinary qualities. The poet persona eulogizes the Niger Delta environment metaphorized as a feminine character with "the lingering look locked onto these teasing curves the dreamy dances of your rolling hips the lyrical lift of your plummy lips" (4). The depiction of the environment as a female is consistent with Ecofeminists' interpretation of the nature as a woman.

The picture of nature created in the poem is the beautiful sea or oceanic waters whose waves, like rolling hips, makes an interest in the trouble caused by a storm. The poet persona here is carried away by the natural beauty of these waters, attributing the quality of a woman to it. He takes his appreciation by commenting on the sweaty noises by the wave's crest which also injects a cool and cosy breeze on the beholders. The poet persona further appreciates the wonderful fragrance from the water which, according to him, has the ability of "cleaning out the anxiety/still the storm in the soul" (4). The poet compares the natural fragrance that is emitted from the water and "the wine sweetness of your yearning lips/The rose tenderness of the tongue-tangling kiss/ Cleaning out the anxiety" (4) to a romantic relationship with a beautiful lady.

This picture above is a metaphorization of the pristine Niger Delta before oil exploration activities as an unsullied beautiful woman.

It was full of life, fresh and with a very enthralling natural fragrance. But, today, the poet persona is robbed of this tranquil scenario as a result of oil exploration activities of multinational concerns. The poet person consequently bemoans his detachment from his pristine environment: “Seismic waves surging through our bodies/Soon the sides of the fault scrap Rob against one another/Stick-slip-lock” (4). It is quite unfortunate that the previously peaceful and charming nature now causes discomfort to man. In the last stanza, he again, bemoans the discomfort these lakes and rivers have brought as a result of seismic workers, who go about shooting and causing serious vibrations, thereby affecting organisms in the environment.

In “my rose is not just a flower”, Ogbowei, takes his appreciation further by praising the fragrance that is emitted from the natural plants: “my rose is not just a flower an intoxicating fragrance an unfurling whorl revealing an appealing pot out which grows a colourful stamen...” (5). The poet expresses his joy over nature further by observing that these trees blossom like red petalled lips. He compares the natural petals in flowers or trees to the natural smile of a person nursing nothing against his fellow men. The picture created is that of the pristine Niger Delta. He presents the poem in the form of a reminiscence, where the present, the beautiful past and a blossom future in the Niger Delta with a clean water and presence of water kindred spirits like the *Beni Out* are blended. The reminiscence is provoked by the present degraded environment as a result of the activities of multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta. It is believed that what has taken the poet into deep thoughts of the past is the hostile male centred environment that uses whatever they have to bring pain and discomfort to nature and her lovers.

Generally, the poet presents the natural sea environment as a woman whose beauty is ravaged by the activities of multinational oil companies. This devaluation of the environment is comparable to the oppression of the woman by patriarchal society and this is in tandem with Ecofeminists’ reasoning.

## Conclusion

The two environmental poets in their respective collection of poems present nature as a woman who is violated by the activities of multinational oil activities. These oil companies, which are often associated with male ownership, are symbolically presented as the male violator of the female. This depiction of the natural environment and its destroyers is consistent with Ecofeminists' contestation against the devaluation of the natural environment. Both poets are bemoaning the destruction of the environment with images of broken romantic and filial relationships with attendant negative consequences on both the woman (nature) and the inhabitants of the Niger Delta.

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