THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SYMBOLS IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *DELTA BLUES AND HOME SONGS*

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the complexity and multi-layered nature of Ojaide's poetic style, and the richness and social relevance of his vision. The paper identifies symbols used by Tanure Ojaide in portraying a mangled environment in *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, discusses the sociological and ideological implications of each symbol identified and relates the symbols to the change imperative that underlines Ojaide's poetry. The ecocritical theory was used to analyse the class and environmental issues conveyed through the symbols in the text. The results show that the poet employs symbols such as cobra, hyena, cockroach, vulture and crow to signify the political and military dictators that have ruled and misgoverned the country since independence. From the analysis, it is discovered that the class most affected by the country's political maladministration and environmental degradation is the lower class whose condition is impoverished by the rich and powerful in society. The paper concludes that symbols serve as a rhetorical strategy for expressing contemporary socio-political issues in the text, emphasising that corrupt and wicked political leadership calls for environmental revivalism and socio-political change.

Keywords: Symbols, environmental degradation, dictators, leadership,

Introduction

The discovery of oil in Oloibiri, now situated in Bayelsa State, in January 1956 by Shell D'Arcy, presently recognised as Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), elicited immense delight throughout

the Niger Delta and its inhabitants. This enthusiasm stemmed from the expectation that Oloibiri and other oil-producing regions in the vicinity would metamorphose into contemporary, industrialised municipalities, with Bayelsa serving as the nation's epicentre for oil exploration. Regrettably, this optimistic vision was overshadowed by a tragic paradox. In addition to experiencing disappointment, the host communities also forfeited their arable lands for the pursuits of oil exploration and exploitation. Unfortunately, nature can no longer be appreciated as before; no one hears the chirping of birds, for the trees, have been destroyed root and branch and the birds have nowhere to perch, except on the blackened roofs of the farmstead.

The disruption of the ecosystem constitutes a profound trauma for individuals who have revelled in the serenity of swamp life, the companionship of avian, aquatic, and terrestrial fauna, and the delightful fragrance of cultivated soil. The dire predicament afflicting the Niger Delta populace is exacerbated by the environmental devastation wrought by multinational oil corporations. These entities have wrought havoc upon aquatic biodiversity and the fertility of the land in local communities. These ecological challenges have galvanized a vehement response from concerned citizens, activists, environmentalists, and, notably, writers, who are united by their fervent advocacy for ecological sustainability and equilibrium. Noteworthy among these literary voices is Tanure Ojaide, who shares his roots with the Niger Delta and mourns the tragic demise of the hanged Ogoni environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, in a segment of his work *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. This lament is not accidental, as Saro-Wiwa represented the same cause (which led to his execution on October 31, 1995, on the orders of the military junta, headed by the late Gen. Sani Abacha) that Ojaide now canvasses. Ojaide uses the occasion of Saro-Wiwa's (and the other eight Ogony martyrs') dastardly execution to showcase the spate of military brutality in Nigeria and the government's indifference to the yearnings of the citizenry.

These governments and their agencies are portrayed by repulsive imagery and symbols (cockroaches, crabs, bedbugs, etc.), as will be seen in our examination of the poems in the following sections of this paper, to convey Ojaide's dissatisfaction with their poor leadership. Ojaide is unapologetically on the side of the people, whose constituency and collective voice he represents, although he is not a self-proclaimed Marxist. The argument made by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Writers in Politics* resonates with Ojaide's poetic vision:

> Literature cannot escape from the class power structure that shapes our everyday lives. Hence the writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in society. What he or she can choose, is one or the other side on the battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of the social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics (1984, 3).

Because it highlights Ojaide's societal commitment, Ngugi's submission is essential to comprehending Ojaide's poetics. According to Ojaide:

> The place has an important role in our vision. The Niger Delta case is a good example. The writer always attempts to be relevant to his or her society. Our immediate society in the Niger Delta is the land of suffering and neglected people who sit on the oil wealth that the Nigerian government and its corrupt leadership squander away. This is the area that produces over 90 per cent of the national wealth, but neither the Federal Government nor the oil companies want to restore the environment they have destroyed. Many people are dying of pollution-related diseases, but nobody comes to the help of the people. Writers from this area are speaking about the conditions they experience and know – exploited, neglected and marginalized people who because of that minority status cannot enjoy the wealth of their land. We cannot but write what we write (qt. in Okunoye, 2002, 227).

The scourge of corruption, abysmal leadership, and environmental degradation that has afflicted Nigerian society catalysed

Ojaide to adopt a revolutionary stance in his socially conscious poetry. Ojaide's heart is rent asunder by the dire circumstances that epitomise Nigerian society during that era. It is the masses who bear the brunt of these issues and, within an all-encompassing society, they endure dehumanisation. This situation represents a grievous and poignant paradox because, despite the masses, constituting the lower class, electing these politicians to various positions, they find themselves marginalised from genuine authority. Once politicians assume power, the people are disregarded, and individuals such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, who dared to denounce their inequitable and oppressive leadership, met with either execution or imprisonment.

In this paper, we delve into Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1997b) to elucidate the poet's use of symbolism as a potent stylistic tool for conveying complex and abstract concepts tangibly and vividly.

Literature Review

Ojaide's oeuvre has received remarkable critical attention from scholars who probed his poetry from diverse perspectives. Akani (2021), for instance, delves into the environmental degradation that has beset the Niger Delta region due to prolonged oil leakage. Similarly, Gomba (2019) investigated the imperial dispossession experienced in the region during the colonial period to the postcolonial era as portrayed in the poetry of Ojaide, arguing that "the wounds which the axe of imperialism has inflicted on the Niger Delta are festering sores today, and the sores are found in the narratives of the repressed (of which Ojaide's poetry is integral)" (116). Gomba's analysis centres on how Ojaide's poetry portrays the enduring impact of imperial dispossession, spanning from the colonial era to the postcolonial period. Scholars such as Nwagbara, Olorunleke, Akpan, Oguntuase, and others have scrutinised the poetic resistance evident in many of Ojaide's works. For instance, Nwagbara (2010) illustrates how Ojaide employs poetry as a formidable tool in challenging the ideological, aesthetic, and cultural paradigms that have facilitated depersonalization and environmental

degradation through ecological imperialism. Similarly, Olorunleke (2017) explores how the poet " highlights the corruption, violations of human rights, and muffling of critical voices by the rulers" (12). It is undeniable that Ojaide fervently employs his poetry as a means of protesting the ecological deterioration and political oppression that has resulted in the desolation and degradation of the Niger Delta.

Some other researchers such as Okoro, Awuzie, Oguntuase, Onyema and Onyema, Onwuka et al., etc. look at how Ojaide depicts the effect of the Niger Delta's harsh environment on the population. They emphasise how traumatised individuals become living in the bleak and decayed environment of the Niger Delta, as depicted by Ojaide in *The Endless Song*. According to Okoro (2018), "Ojaide does a good job in capturing the defoliated physical landscape and waterways for his readers. The once lush green rainforest and mangroves of the coastal region are no more" (24). Since Ojaide is essentially an environmental poet who uses his lyrical art to combat environmental problems in the Niger Delta, it is difficult to analyse his works without bringing up the desolate and denigrated environment in the region.

It is obvious from our exploration that scholars who studied Tanure Ojaide's poetic works focused on the impact of the harsh environment on the people in the region, ignoring the symbolic representation of the forces or factors that bring about the toxicity of the environment.

The impetus for this study arises from the use of symbols to depict the harrowing ordeals endured by the people of the Niger Delta as seen in *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. Our examination will focus on the poet's utilisation of symbols to engender ambiguity and multifaceted depths of meaning within his poetry, as a means of illustrating the challenges faced by those residing in the barren and deteriorated landscapes of the Niger Delta, attributable to Shell's avarice and the Nigerian federal government's dereliction. To ensure clarity, it is imperative to thoroughly explore the theoretical framework employed in this study, which is ecocriticism.

Glotfelty's (1996) operational definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* delineates ecocriticism as the examination of the interconnection between literature and the natural environment (xviii). Glotfelty further asserts, "Ecocriticism embraces a perspective that centres on the Earth in the realm of literary studies, akin to how feminist criticism scrutinizes language and literature through a gender-conscious lens and Marxist criticism introduces an awareness of production modes and economic class into its textual analysis." (54). Glotfelty emphasises that ecocritics explore the historical evolution of human perceptions of the environment and assess whether these portrayals in literature have been accurate and fitting. Coupe (2000) adds that "Ecocriticism is an approach to literature which considers the relationship between human and non-human life as represented in literary texts and which theorizes about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction" (302). Estok (2001) observes that "ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making a connection" (220). In the article that extends ecocriticism to Shakespearean studies, Estok argues that ecocriticism is more than:

> simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analysing the function – thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise – of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds (16-17).

Buell (2001) cherishes the definition of ecocriticism as "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis" (430). Gomides (2006), when asked what ecocriticism should be or is, offers a lucid and practical definition: "The field of enquiry analyses and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about

human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations" (16).

In line with the above summations, we are interested in the greater issue of environmental justice in the Niger Delta, as well as the rights of minorities, the region's flora and fauna, and eventually the biotic community itself, as seen in Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. Aquatic life and soil fertility have been severely devastated by oil exploration risks. A renowned sociologist from Nigeria, Eteng (1977), notes:

> What currently prevails in the southern oil enclave is a specific variant of internal colonialism [...] The specific, highly exploitative and grossly inequitable endowment/ ownership-exchange entitlements relations between the Nigerian state and the oil-bearing communities in particular, explain why the enormous oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard and life chances of the peasant inhabitant of the oil-bearing enclave (21).

This has been the intricate dilemma in the Niger Delta, where the former state of splendour has yielded to destitution. The subpar quality of life prevalent in the region is, in fact, a reflection of nearly every oil-producing community in the nation, as emphasised by Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009):

> Like the Niger Delta novelist and dramatist of his time, the Nigerian 21st-century Niger Delta poet laments not just the devastation of the Niger Delta natural environment and the heavy economic subjugation that the area has been subjected to, but also the violence and politico-economic tussle it has bred (153).

Abalogu and Onyerionwu contend that Bassey's "Gas Flares" "puts in poetic perspective a situation in the Niger Delta where the sky, the sea, and the earth have all been set ablaze" (154) due to "the earth gassed" (Bassey 48). Yet, Bassey recounts the poignant narrative of the ill-fated relationship between the Niger Delta's oil and its inhabitants

within the extensive poem titled "We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood". Once revered as a fount of prosperity, vitality, and joy, oil has now unveiled its true nature as a harbinger of death, brutality, and misery. The poem by Bassey, written in a frustrated tone, is as follows:

> Dried tear bags
> Polluted streams
> Things are real
> When found in dreams
> We see their shells
> Behind military shields
> Evil, horrible, gallows, called oilrigs
> Drilling our souls (14).

Consequently, the earth's thirst remains unquenched, as it lacks the nourishing elements required for rejuvenation. It undergoes a gradual and agonizing decline, extinguishing the hopes of bountiful yields cherished by the farmer and fisherman. This scenario evokes memories of Hopkins' "Inversnaid," in which he champions the cause of ecological conservation:

> What would the world be, once bereft?
> Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,
> O let them be left, wildness and wet;
> Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet (qt. in Abrams 73).

This paper delves into Ojaide's use of symbols to interrogate a world in disarray, employing ecocriticism as its guiding theoretical framework. Our analysis will dissect the representation of nature within these symbols and their insinuations regarding the overarching implications of ecological discord. Furthermore, we will scrutinise the interplay and contradictions among these symbol sets and their connection to socio-political contexts.

Symbols as Signifiers in *Delta Blues and Home Songs*

> When natural resources are extracted from one regional ecosystem to be transformed and consumed in another, the resource-exporting region loses value that occurs in its physical environment. These losses eventually decelerate the extractive region's economy, while the resource-consuming communities gain value and their economies accelerate (Bunker 25).

The excerpt highlighted above serves as a stark indicator of the abysmal status of Nigeria in general, and the Niger Delta in particular. This region, replete with abundant resources, paradoxically grapples with poverty, a truly cruel irony. Numerous individuals have succumbed to entirely preventable factors like starvation, disease, malnutrition, and various other conditions, all within this land of abundant oil and mineral wealth. In the section previously cited, Bunker takes the position that while Nigeria exports oil to bolster its foreign currency reserves, it exposes its environment to manifold perils. This aligns with the assertion put forth by Foster and Clark (2004) that ecological imperialism constitutes what is grossly responsible for "robbing the periphery of its natural wealth and exploiting ecological resources" (189).

In the Niger Delta, a poverty-stricken region acclaimed as the epicentre of oil production in Nigeria, oil displaces the populace, disrupts their daily lives, contaminates their water sources, and taints the air they inhale. It also wreaks havoc on their arable lands, their plant life, and wildlife, thereby upending their very existence. Residents of these oil-dependent communities confront profound health risks stemming from oil spills, hydrocarbon contamination, gas flaring, and other manifestations of environmental degradation, both severe and less pronounced. This evokes reminiscences of Adesuyi's (2000) "The New Testament," in which the poet laments:

> In Ogoni, the fish are fevered
> From the typhoid of crude
> Oil paints the sea black
> And all the waters mourn (25).

Such is the condition prevailing in the Niger Delta. As the land lacks the necessary nutrients for rejuvenation, the earth's vitality withers, causing parched desolation. The pollution of the water leads to the demise of multiple fish species. Consequently, the farmer's aspiration for a thriving harvest is thwarted, as both land and water endure an extended, agonising decline.

In the opening section of "Delta Blues," Ojaide vehemently criticises the environmental catastrophe, the rule of the late dictator General Sani Abacha, and the pervasive injustices within the entire political apparatus. To abstain from employing pejorative language, Ojaide employs symbols with connotations that allude to the interrelationships among the oil-producing communities, the oil magnates (exploiters), and the authoritarian regime led by General Abacha. The opening section of "Delta Blues" is where Ojaide launches a scathing attack on the environmental crisis, the late dictator General Sani Abacha's regime, and the egregious injustice that permeates the entire political system. The terms "cobra," "hyena," "cockroach," "vulture," and "crow" are employed to depict Abacha and his associates. In contrast, words such as "elephant," "iroko," "eagle," and similar descriptors are attributed to the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, a prominent environmentalist who met a gruesome fate along with eight other Ogoni activists championing environmental rights.

The late Ken Saro-Wiwa and his comrades' activism against environmental degradation, marginalisation, and tyranny, their subsequent execution, and Ojaide's tribute to the Ogoni Nine constitute just a few of the prominent themes addressed in "Delta Blues." In the introductory segment of *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, Ojaide adeptly employs symbols, imagery, metaphors, and other rhetorical tools to effectively communicate his poetic message. Within this collection, the poet masterfully harnesses symbols, affirming the assertion made by the Swiss linguist Saussure in his work "Course in General Linguistics" regarding the interconnectedness of language and reality. Seizing upon symbols, therefore, Ojaide as an “ecologist”, brings

to the fore, the activities of oil merchants and the effects these have on the host communities.

Our analysis of the poems in "Delta Blues" begins with the second poem, titled "When Green Was the Lingua Franca," which is reminiscent of Osundare's "Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder":

> This earth is
> ours to work not to waste
> ours to man not to maim
> This earth is ours to plough, not to plunder (49).

In the above excerpt from Osundare's 1986 Commonwealth Poetry Prize-winning collection, *The Eye of the Earth*, the persona condemns environmental devastation and makes a clarion call for ecological preservation and balance. For instance, in "When Green Was the Lingua Franca," Ojaide imbues ostensibly mundane elements with a profound sense of awe and aesthetic splendour. He unveils their once-abundant vitality and the inherent grace of their existence, only to be marred by the intrusion of Shell, which disrupted their harmonious coexistence:

> In the forest green
> was the lingua franca
> with many dialects (12).

In the stanza above, the term "Green" encapsulates the essence of life, agricultural pursuits, verdant landscapes, and a wholesome way of existence. The word selection is praiseworthy, given that agriculture and fishing serve as the primary economic pillars for the Niger Delta populace. The utilisation of the metaphor "lingua franca" signifies that these vocations hold universal importance, as they are embraced by all inhabitants of the region. The term "dialects" and the adjective "many" suggest the diversity of agricultural practices, all essential for their sustenance. This may also be seen as a reflection of the numerous dialects spoken within the Niger Delta, considering its multilingual nature and the adoption of Pidgin English as a means of communication.

As illustrated above, symbols, images, and metaphors fall under the overarching category of rhetorical devices. These three engender mental impressions, albeit to varying degrees. Maduakor contends that "an image can be a symbol but not in every instance can a symbol become an image" (25). In the stanza from "When Green Was the Lingua Franca," "green" serves a dual role, functioning as both an image and a symbol, emblematic of the agricultural prominence characterising the Niger Delta. Conversely, "lingua franca" does not fulfil the role of a symbol; rather, it embodies an image and concurrently operates as a metaphor. Our argument hinges on the notion that it evokes a mental tableau within the reader's cognition, where the verdant forest appears to engage in a form of discourse. Additionally, it assumes the role of a metaphor for the region's primary occupations, namely fishing and farming, acting as the vehicle propelling the conceptual element of "green." The effect accomplished by the poet here is one of brevity and efficiency.

The Niger Delta flourished in lush greenery until Shell arrived in 1956. The poet recollects:

> Explosions of shells to *under*
> my grease-black *gold*
> drove the season mental
> and to walk on their heads.
> Who denies doomed neighbours?
> It intensifies with the execution
> of our very friends; the *ogre*
> closes on every foothold (13).

The arrival of Shell interfered with the people's normal way of life, as the above excerpt demonstrates. The shell represents destruction and ecological destruction. The black gold, or oil, is extracted and shipped overseas, consequently enhancing the nation's wealth. Paradoxically, the Niger Delta, the very source of this oil, is forsaken by its destiny. Environmental rights advocates acted in response to the government's carelessness, which reaps where it has not sowed. But

regrettably, the sorrow caused by oil exploration and extraction "intensifies with execution / of our friends" (13). The eight other Ogoni martyrs who also perished while "the ogre / closes on every foothold" (13), including Ken Saro-Wiwa, are the friends being referred to. The "ogre" functions as a symbol utilised by the poet to represent the late dictator, General Sani Abacha, who spared no effort in pursuing political and environmental activism. Consequently, the devastation of Ogoni land was the consequence of collaborative exploitation carried out by those labelled by Saro-Wiwa as Nigeria's "internal colonialists," as well as the unassailable transnational influence wielded by Shell and Chevron.

Due to the marginalisation of the minority and what he calls “ecological genocide” (71) the late eco-activist, Saro-Wiwa waged war against Shell and the military, whose collaborative venture had brought disaster to the host oil communities of the Niger Delta. Unfortunately, this act of opposition was seen by the then-military government of the late General Sani Abacha as a treasonable felony, resulting in the dastardly execution of Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni activists. In “Wails”, a poem composed after *Udje* dance songs, Ojaide laments the painful passage of Saro-Wiwa and his comrades. In an elegiac tone, the poet wails a dirge:

> Another *ANA* meeting will be called
> and singers will gather.
> I will look all over
> and see a space
> that can take more than a hundred –
> the *elephant* never hides.
> I ask the god of songs
> whether all the singers will come,
> but that silent space
> *that can take more than a hundred*
> stares at me with nostalgia
> and gives me a *feverish cold*.
> I won’t find one singer
> when another *ANA* meeting will be called (17).

It is necessary to note that the late Saro-Wiwa was one-time President of ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors), an umbrella under which Nigerian writers converge. Saro-Wiwa's death, therefore, closed a chapter in the history of the association. As we observe in "Wails", various singers (poets, novelists and dramatists) have gathered except Saro-Wiwa, symbolised by the "elephant". He had a towering posture as "the elephant never hides" (17). His absence at the usual ANA meeting, therefore, "gives me a feverish cold" (17) is "a euphemism for shock, disappointment and pain at the news of Saro-Wiwa's violent ending or departure" (Olafioye 130).

The poem, which is written in the style of *udje* dance songs, extols Saro-Wiwa's unreserved concern for the environment and criticises people who have turned Nigeria upside down for their vices. It is noted by Olafioye that "*Udje* satire lacks sympathy for its victim" (133). The poet laments:

> The boa thoughtlessly devours
> its own off springs [sic], Nigeria's
> a boa-constrictor in the world map
>
> Streets echo with wails.
> A terrible thing has struck the land,
> everyone is covered with shame or sorrow –
> this death exceeds other deaths.
> They have murdered a favourite son,
> this news cannot be a hoax;
> for the love of terror,
> they have hanged a favourite son
> and eight other bearers of truth.
> Nobody fools others about these deaths (18).

The word "boa" serves as a metaphor for the military regime of the late General Sani Abacha, which was responsible for ordering the murder of Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni rights activists for supporting environmental revivalism. The analogy "Nigeria's / a boa constrictor..." (18) strengthens this claim. By murdering one of her own for speaking

the truth, Nigeria, as represented by the military administration, cannot be claimed to be any different from the boa, a species of snake known for killing other creatures at will. Thus, the poet unleashes a venomous assault on the military, disparaging their terrible character. This is typical of *Udje's* satirical tune. Darah clarifies this behaviour:

> *Udje* satirical practice is conducted in the form of warfare amongst communities or wards; hence the higher the social standing of an individual the greater the chance of being attacked in song (185).

Returning briefly to "Wails", we notice Ojaide's unrelenting exposure of those who claim to represent the interest of the country. Rather than protect its citizens from attack, the military government turned around to unleash violence on them. In line with this position, Fanon contends:

> The state, which by its strength and discretion ought to inspire confidence and disarm and lull everybody to sleep, on the contrary, seeks to impose itself spectacularly. It makes a display, it jostles people and bullies them, thus intimating the citizen that he is in continual danger (132).

As a result, it is not surprising that the poet laments the brutal execution of the Ogoni Nine in "Wails". He uses the *Udje* style to confront the rulers in his satirical bash, which is open to anyone. At this juncture, it should be emphasised that the *Udje* satirical form can occasionally be utilised to extol the virtue of deserving individuals such as Saro-Wiwa and the other Ogoni martyrs. Darah supports this claim:

> [...] Since the panegyric genre gained prominence several years ago, the principle of indiscriminate attack has been revised somewhat. A subtle attempt is now being made to redefine the social composition of the 'Udje satirical net' to exclude 'successful and illustrious' citizens who are known to have achieved great heights in the business world of the cities. These individuals are, in the opinion of the practitioners, worthy sons and daughters of the village who should not be smeared with the mud of satire. (185)

This view is supported by Anene-Boyle, who writes that "panegyric poetry is designed to eulogize the virtues of given subjects and therefore, stresses accepted values" (18). Saro-Wiwa's great contribution and gift to the world he adored are highlighted in "Wails" by Ojaide through a series of rhetorical questions:

> Who will make me laugh?
> Who will bring *Bassey & Company* to life?
> *Who will speak to me rotten English?*
> *the lingua franca of the coastline?*
> Who will tell the forest of flowers?
> Who will traverse the darkling plain of the delta?
> Who will stand in front as the *iroko* shield?
> to regain *the stolen birth right of millions,*
> (18, our emphasis).

We might infer Saro-Wiwa's accomplishments from the line above: he was a consummate humourist, "Who will make me laugh...?" (18) A novelist who penned *Soza Boy* (1986) in pidgin English and is attributed with writing *Bassey & Company* (1987) and *A Forest of Flowers* (1986), among other works, and who asked, "Who will speak to me rotten English?/the lingua franca of the coastline?" Saro-Wiwa is the "*iroko* shield," a metaphor that describes his campaign for justice and rights of groups and advocacy of regaining "the stolen birth right of millions" (18). In the poet's view:

> It's for his immeasurable services
> that the giants remembered.
> There will be no end to this wail (18).

Thus, the struggle continues for "Boro left for Saro-Wiwa to take over, / the stump will grow into another *iroko*" (19). The symbols "stump" and "*iroko*" signify the continual process of revolutionary struggle: "stump" represents Saro-Wiwa whose revolutionary spirit will give rise to later environmentalists, symbolised by "*iroko*".

In "Delta Blues", the title collection, Ojaide's abiding concern for the environment reaches its peak. The poem depicts the tragedy that

befell the host oil communities of the Niger Delta region. Through the careful deployment of imagery and symbolism, the poet presents an environment that was once productive and green, but is now reduced to dust:

> This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,
> reels from an immeasurable *wound*.
> Barrels of alchemical draughts flow
> from this hurt to the unquestioning world
> that lights up its life in a blind trust.
> *The inheritance I sat on for centuries*
> *now crushes my body and soul* (21, our emphasis).

Until the arrival of the multinational companies, the region had enjoyed a life of bountiful harvest due to the richness and fertility of the soil. The activities of the multinational companies, Shell and Chevron, crush the biodiversity and environment of the Delta region. Unfortunately, "This home of salt and fish" (21); "This home of plants and birds" (21) that "least expected a stampede" (21), "reels from an immeasurable wound" (21), and "The inheritance I sat on for centuries/now crushes my body and soul" (21). It is a painful irony that a region that is said to be the live-wire of the Nigerian nation, suffers immeasurable pains and penury. The image of a "wound" paints a picture of a people undergoing a difficult period. As is evident in the lines above, the joyous song of life the people once sang has been turned into a dirge. The devastation of the environment is carried out by multinational companies in collaboration with a handful of Nigerian political class. Ekine observes that:

> The multinational oil companies, mainly Shell, Chevron / Texaco, and Elf, have treated both the people and the environment with total disdain and hostility. They have worked hand in hand with a succession of brutal and corrupt regimes to protect their exploitation [...] The Niger Delta has become an ecological disaster zone (67-68).

Such has been the paradox of the region, the splendour of which has been turned into squalor. Indeed, the poor standard of living in most of the host communities in the region reflects life in virtually all oil-producing communities in Nigeria. The poet laments:

> My nativity gives immortal pain
> masked in barrels of oil –
> I stew in the *womb of fortune*.
> I live on the deathbed
> prepared by a *cabal of brokers*
> breaking the peace of centuries
> & tainting not only a thousand rivers,
> my lifeblood from the beginning,
> but scorching the air and soil (21-22, our emphasis).

The metaphor "womb of fortune" is apt as it serves as a poignant reminder of the region's predicament. Numerous sons and daughters from this region, symbolised by birds, depart Nigeria in pursuit of better prospects, driven by discontent with a life where they lack agency:

> My *birds* take a flight to the sea,
> the *animals* grope in the *burning bush*;
> head blindly to the hinterland
> where the *cows* enthroned.
> The sky sings my evergreen leaves
> and *baldness* robs me of youthful years.
> These are the constitutional rewards
> of plenitude, *a small fish in Niger*!
> (22, our emphasis).

The images, symbols, and metaphors presented above rationalise the departure undertaken by certain disillusioned Niger Delta residents. They contend that the nation is under the rule of tyrannical leaders who have reduced the populace to sacrificial pawns, exemplified by the phrase "the animals grope in the burning bush" (21). The metaphor "burning bush" symbolises Nigeria, marked by suffering, oppression, and related injustices. This comes as no surprise, given that it is a nation

"where the cow's enthroned" (21), with the "cow" representing the late dictator, General Sani Abacha, often considered a "sacred cow." His regime brought the people to a state of desolation, as evident in the lines, “The sky singes my evergreen leaves / and baldness robs me of youthful years” (21). These images convey a sense of emptiness and degradation: "green leaves" allude to the natural environment of the Niger Delta marred by skyward pollution through gas flaring, and "baldness" symbolises a decline in growth and development.

Ironically, despite its contribution to nation-building, the Niger Delta is rewarded with only "a small fish in the Niger!" (21), underscoring the meagre share the region receives in revenue allocation. This act of injustice fuels Ojaide's determination to address the issue. As noted by Maduka, "...there is a direct link between literature and social institutions. Literature's primary role is to critique these institutions and eventually effect positive societal changes" (11).

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to probe Ojaide’s employment of symbols to interrogate socio-political dislocation in the country and environmental rupture in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Central to our argument is the poet’s celebration of the life and times of the hanged Ogoni environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa with eight others. The convoluted political structure of Nigeria is brought to light. As our analysis makes clear, Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists were unjustly executed for resisting environmental degradation and minority injustice. Killing them, as we noticed, has changed nothing; the struggle for ecological preservation continues.

The prevailing frustration experienced by the populace is a direct result of both military and quasi-civilian governance in the country. Therefore, criticism of the inept government shall continue to prevail until the tide of oppression is reversed. The marginalised and oppressed citizens of Nigeria may not have initiated a revolution in the truest sense, but the actions of civil society groups signify that the ruling

authorities are not as secure as they may believe. Someday, the tables will turn against them.

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