

## **Poetry of Ecocritical Pressure: The New Poetic Engagement of Odia Ofeimun**

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### **Abstract**

The world recreated by a poet replicates the one in which he lives. The setting of Odia Ofeimun's eco-poems articulates a dystopian imagination and landscape. This devastated vision of the Niger Delta as a result of the inner struggle to resist the pressure of pollution forms the crux of this study. Relying on a textual analytical method, the researcher examines the ecocritical pressure which engages the imagination of Ofeimun. Inferences on the data are drawn from an ecocritical reading of Ofeimun's collection entitled *Go Tell the Generals* which is abbreviated as GTG. The purpose of the study is to examine the strategies enunciated in Ofeimun's poems to combat the scourge of environmental pollution. The findings are that pollution festers as the people wallow in indifference; that Ofeimun depicts environmental degradation. The essay concludes that the people should embark on environmental protection, adequate preparation to fight environmental destruction as well as defend the natural habitat as positive responses to dealing with environmental pressures.

*Keywords:* Ecocriticism, Eco-poems, Poetic engagement, Ecological pressure, Poetry and Environmental destruction

### **Introduction**

The twenty-first century was expected to be the age of eco-paradise owing to the numerous eco-sensitive campaigns and conferences such as: UN Conference on the Human Environment (1972); United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992); General Assembly Special Session on the Environment (1997); World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002); UN Conference on Sustainable Development ((2012); and UN Sustainable Development Summit (2015)

organized across the world to increase global awareness to the reality of climate change and global warming. As things have turned out, this is the epoch of great disappointment as the outcome of these conferences is yet to reduce the effects of climate change. The term ecocritical pressure as applied in this essay presupposes the danger, hardship, and tension which human activities wreak on the environment thus leading to its destruction and to human suffering. Much of the tension stems from the aggressive implementation of urban renewal policy, unabated increase in population leading to pressure on land, massive industrialization leading to increase in industrial waste, resurgence of natural disaster, insurgency and desertification. Judging by their commitment to combating the above ecological concerns, the new poems by Nigerian poets, unlike the earlier ones which depict environmental degradation, function as the verbal barometer by which these ecological pressures are not only felt but also addressed.

The history of ecocritical literature in Nigeria will not be complete without documenting the contribution of Ken Saro-Wiwa. He led in raising public awareness to the devastating activities of oil exploration companies in Ogoni land and the Niger Delta region through his crusade for environmental justice and reparation owing to the damage caused by oil spillage and air pollution. His eventual killing opened a new chapter in the annals of eco-poetical writings. Thus Saro-Wiwa's death represents the flagship of ecocritical literature. His audacious confrontation with power inspired the new writings of which Tanure Ojaide is the precursor. Ojaide had since employed his poetic art to expose the Niger Delta predicament. The tradition is built on lamentation to whip up public sentiments towards environmental restoration.

Niyi Osundare's vision of the environment is much deeper and encompassing than that of Ojaide. Whereas the former stimulates interest in Niger Delta ecological world the latter draws attention to the environment in general. Osundare's poetic testament entails the conscious inculcation of the idea that the earth is the home of humanity and which naturally calls for its preservation as well as cautioning against activities that threaten it. However, both poets employ the environment as a poetic metaphor through which they convey their anger against violators of the country and its natural resources.

Odia Ofeimun is not known for writing ecocritical poetry. In fact, he is a polemical poet with a Marxist bent. Since his emergence on the national stage in the early eighties, his poetry has addressed socio-political issues but in the last decade, he has shifted attention to the environment. This is the new focus of his poems as they are preoccupied with presenting environmental problems as well as suggesting ways of eradicating them. His foray into ecocritical poetry is nurtured by the need to employ ecocriticism as a springboard to launch his revolutionary ideology. Many of the environmental poems written by Ofeimun are those that immortalize Saro-Wiwa and seek to extenuate his legacy. A careful reading of ecocritical poetry in Nigeria reveals two broad categories: the Niger Delta centred ecological poems and the non-Niger Delta centred ones. Leading the former is Ojaide and his school of environmental agitators who lament the ruin of the environment. The latter group is led by Osundare who has a broader sense of environmental devastation. Beyond these two classes, there is the new threshold, the emergent school that incorporates the two to form a mixture of despair and hope thus suggesting ways to eradicate ecological destruction in Nigeria. This new poetic engagement is championed by Ofeimun.

### **Theoretical Background**

The theoretical foundation of this study is ecocriticism. What then is ecocriticism? Who are the precursors of this theory? What does it hope to achieve? These questions will form the focus of this section. Buell and Glotfelty are reputed to have begun the study of ecocriticism. According to Glotfelty (1996: xviii), ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” She explains that “ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies”. Apart from the approach being focused on the environment, it also addresses the human approach particularly how humans trigger ecological problems and their role in reversing the devastation.

Goring et al (2001:194) provide a deeper definition thus: “The concern of ecocriticism is with the relationship between literature and our changing physical environment. This concern includes, most obviously, depictions of the physical environment in literature”. The thrust of ecocriticism is to interrogate the fictionalization of the physical

environment by examining their presentation in literary texts. Following the change in the natural environment, literature, as an expression of human experience, reveals the ways the change affects human beings and their taste and behaviour in the light of ecological challenges.

Bennett and Royle (2014:145) expound the concept thus: “Ecocriticism is also concerned with teasing out the ecological questions, implications and challenges of any writing, whether or not that writing might involve a conscious and explicit engagement with nature”. Bennett and Royle agree that the pivot on which ecocriticism revolves is the way the theory is channelled to examine hidden issues confronting the environment. The environment cannot be ignored in the literature that emerges from the problems facing the nation.

Dobie (2012:242) articulating the views of Glotfelty on ecocriticism, writes that the theory follows “an analogous pattern, beginning with an interest in ‘representations’, and examination of how nature is depicted in literature, thereby raising public awareness of attitudes toward the natural world”. Ecocriticism influences public opinion regarding the issues concerned with the environment. Literature allows for an ecocritical evaluation of the threat facing the environment.

Similarly, Abrams and Harpham (2009:88) explain that “many ecocritical writings continue to be oriented toward heightening their readers’ awareness and even toward inciting them to social and political action”. An ecocritical approach to solving ecological problems does not end with presenting the challenges but includes a concerted agenda to have the problems resolved. This orientation comes in the form of public enlightenment.

We shall begin with Alu (200:649). According to the critic:

The emergence of the second generation of Nigerian poets, (namely, Ojaide, Osundare and Odia Ofeimun fully represented by their works which include *Children of Iroko* (1979), *The Poet Lied* (1980) and *Songs of the Market Place* (1983) came in to provide an answer.

Alu’s argument rests on the fact that poems written before the second generation were concerned with asking questions. Thus the second generation poets classified by Alu to which Ofeimun belongs is concerned with providing alternative responses to the problems of

society. This explains why Ofeimun's poems are replete with prescriptive perspectives. The present essay looks at Ofeimun's response to ecocritical issues.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Okunoye (2005:105) examines the location of home in Ofeimun's *London Letters and Other Poems* and writes that:

By identifying himself as “a named unready for home”, the poet-persona hints at the possibility of extending the concept of home. He is particularly conscious of the shaping influence of Europe based on historical affinity and continuing association.

Okunoye's perspective should be considered against the backdrop of travel writings which have their own aesthetic ideology. The concept of home as envisaged in the essay extends beyond the physical to a mental state. This essay clearly overlooks the content of ecocriticism which flows in the poems of Ofeimun.

Olaoluwa (2006:254) pays critical attention on Ofeimun's travel poetry and writes as follows: “Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems*, therefore, fits into this category. In other words, the streaks of controversies and contradictions in which globalization is seen confer on it the lot of a contested space”. Olaoluwa considers globalization from a broad perspective and demonstrates the poet's protest and its manifestations in the poems. This study, diverse in themes and style as it is, does not examine the ecocritical aspects of Ofeimun's poems.

Okuyade (2010:211) examines civil war poetry as ledger, focusing on the critic's re-articulation of hope from grief, making a passing comment on Ofeimun's poetry thus: “For poets like Odia Ofeimun, the war experience was punishing, painful but hardly traumatic”. He adds that “Ofeimun's evocative lines, which he realizes through incantatory poetics, evoke the horrifying agony of war”. This position is agreeable to this researcher and one hastens to add that Ofeimun's evocation of war feelings is meant to warn against the tragic consequence of war. Like several critics before Okuyade, he does not deal directly with the ecocritical poems of Ofeimun.

Eke (2012:286) examines the quest for social justice in postcolonial Nigerian poetry using as case study poets like Ojaide, Osundare and Ofeimun. On Ofeimun's poetry, he dwells on the poet's suggestion of revolution to achieving social justice:

The charm of his poetry lies in the clarion call for an alternative government that will control the nation's economy. Ofeimun wishes for an ideal leadership that will guarantee the maximum welfare, freedom and happiness of everybody on the grounds of social justice and equality.

As it is with Ofeimun, he believes in an alternative government as solution to society's problems. The leadership that will guarantee the welfare, freedom and happiness of citizens is one that will produce social justice. Eke's view is correct and one will like to add that Ofeimun's view of revolution is in the area of political change. Although Eke's opinion points to the change of government, it does not address ecocritical challenges in Ofeimun's poetry.

Similarly, Idaevbor (2005:95) dwells on Ofeimun's revolutionary strategies and suggests that defiance and resistance are the two main strategies in Ofeimun's poetry for attaining revolution. Thus Idaevbor writes that "Ofeimun believes freedom can only come about through force". Although one agrees with Idaevbor that defiance and resistance can lead to revolution, other strategies can be found in the poems of Ofeimun.

Our review of related scholarship proves that even when many scholars have studied the poems of Ofeimun, their efforts tend to examine socio-political issues to the exclusion of his ecocritical poems. This leaves us with critical gaps in this area. Thus there is need to examine the ecocritical nature of the poetry of this poet. This study demonstrates that Ofeimun's eco-poems dwell on environmental destruction and suggest ways of tackling the above ecological challenges.

### **Environmental Destruction**

Ofeimun's poems respond to the pressure of environmental destruction. This forms the focus of his ecocritical poems. Running through many of the poems is the pervading sense of environmental devastation. In

Ofeimun's poem titled "Memory (iii)", the focus is on pollution as one of the ways the environment is being destroyed:

Her coverlet of homely cotton wear was haven in the  
teeth of strange events until the marauders came in search  
of the breakers of oil pipes – fishermen decrying polluted  
rivers - pregnant women railing at gas flares They came,  
harbingers of toxic waste at half lesson before noon.  
(GTG, 20)

Predominant among the causes of environmental pollution are oil spills and gas flaring. The constant breaking of "oil pipes" leads to water pollution. Also, the "gas flares" have serious effects on pregnant women whose foetuses are being threatened. Equally harmful is the dumping of "toxic waste" into water ways. The magnitude of the destruction compels the "fishermen" to decry the pollution of rivers because their economic activities depend largely on rivers. Similarly, this explains why they rile against the continuous flaring of gases in the environment.

The consequence of the above is captured below:

they marched upon our ripening crops, Sweat of the  
seasons that had braved the tall flames selling our nights  
to acid rains de-manuring the earth (20)

The effect has been too grave for the people. As can be seen, it leads to loss of harvest as their "ripening crops" are destroyed. The persona reveals how those in search of burst oil pipelines "marched upon" their crops. This action puts to waste the "sweat of the seasons". At night, "the tall flames" coming from oil rigs builds up "acid rains" which when condensed makes the land infertile because of the "de-manuring" effect on the earth. The image of acid rain conveys the ruin on not just the physical environment but also on the economic potentiality of the place for agriculture.

Ofeimun in "Children of the Creeks" depicts environmental degradation. There is a ring of despair, suffering and pain in every line and of course, we find terrible images of savage and wanton destruction of the natural environment:

What for bearance  
 the earth demands of those  
 whose crops are pulped  
 to mud and black kaolin  
 by ill-will, ill-done  
 and by prayers that turn  
 every fish belly-up. (25)

One can easily feel the persona's anger and rejection of the status quo. The speaker questions the rationale behind the call for "forbearance" by those who lose "crops" and "are pulped". The sense of destruction of agricultural produce is revealed by the word, "pulped". This word is metaphoric in nature. It shows the image of total destruction. Also this is further emphasised by the mud image. The persona through his angry tone portrays the situation where the people continue to suffer environmental loss. This suffering is occasioned by the "ill-will" of some greedy men whose activities "turn/every fish belly-up". This is a euphemism for the destruction of not just the fishes but also the aquatic life in the area.

The speaker ends the poem with provocative images:

The children of the creeks  
 yelled in searing electrodes;  
 as evergreen trees roasted  
 in the haggle of loot-sharers  
 who stalked the Delta  
 for the very last overcoming  
 of the lower Niger. (25)

The image of "searing electrodes" evokes serious electric fire. It depicts the havoc of bush burning in which the "evergreen trees" are said to be "roasted" in the inferno. Thus this reveals environmental destruction. There is also the pain as revealed through the reaction of the people as they "yelled" because of the fire and heat of the burning bush. Ofeimun's depiction of environmental degradation is meant to explain the environmental pressure which the poet cannot ignore. Thus the poet turns critic when he engages his poetic acumen to expose the grave threat to the environment.



## Responses to Ecological Pressures

The main thrust of this section is to present the various ways envisioned by the poet to deal with the threat of environmental pollution which have posed serious danger to humanity. Ofeimun's "Memory (iii)" reveals the need for ecological preservation. In the speaker's opinion, the people should be resilient, courageous and resolute in protecting the environment:

Always, she sang as she paddled us  
to school and back. She sang:  
stand tall, stall tall, you must stand  
No matter the tide, change the world. (GTG, 20)

The beauty of these lines resides in the subtle appeal to the people's sense of courage. The entire quatrain finds its strength in the speaker's repetition of "stand tall". These words reveal the confidence expected of the people. When one considers the next line, one gets to understand the need for the repetition. The words draw attention to the need for the people to resist acts which are inimical to the environment. The word "tide" functions as a metaphor which depicts the wave of opposition, victimization and ruthless killings visited on the Niger Delta people.

Through the technique of reportage, the speaker conveys the pervading mood in the Niger Delta. The general atmosphere smells of restiveness, anger and combat readiness to fight for the preservation of the environment. This is revealed in "Memory (v)" thus:

No one knew if she was alive or dead  
none could paddle us home with her song  
until she returned, different, much younger  
she taught us to love our creeks, our rivers  
to defend the mangroves with spirit, as they did  
the Irish who, she said, took to sure battle  
when colonists brought Troubles to the bogs. (22)

Relying on the protest song which past environmentalists have taught them, the persona urges the new generation of activists to be inspired to love and fight in defence of their natural heritage – the creeks, rivers and the mangroves. There is a direct allusion to the Irish resistance to

domination. By the same token, Ofeimun urges the people never to allow the Niger Delta land and waterways to be polluted through the nefarious activities of oil companies.

Beyond the need to defend the natural habitat is the need to combat those who conspire to steal the rich oil wealth, its content and the heritage by selling them to Europeans. According to the speaker, the fight must be directed:

Against brigands, vultures, and their acolytes,  
 She taught us to love our creeks, our rivers  
 havens and shrines sold over heads  
 by reformers hawking to outer Mongolia.

The image of vultures is used to explain the parasitic behaviour of oil explorers. Just as the vulture swoops on its victims so the oil men steal the natural resources of the people. This fitting image justifies the linguistic choice of the word “brigands”. They are bandits in their operation. Consequently, the lady freedom fighter has taught the speaker and his generation to be patriotic to the cause of the Niger Delta in order to bring an end to exploitation, deceit and robbery.

Not done with articulating the need for protest, the persona reminds the people of what they have been told to do:

She taught us to question with sticks  
 So if they come again as they will,  
 - since they will come again for the loot  
 She gritted her teeth: don't let it happen. (22)

The parting message is instructive here. The whole import of the poem is encapsulated in this stanza. The courage to change the world can be found in the unyielding spirit of the people. No one can deny the provocative ideas in this stanza. The speaker indirectly encourages and calls the people to pick up arms in order to fight looters of their oil. The finality of the last line “don't let it happen” sums up the belligerent tone of the stanza. There is this prophetic dimension of the poem which tends to predict the behaviour of oil looters. In the lady's opinion, they will come again but it is the responsibility of the people never to allow the brigandage to occur.

The same point is made in the last stanza: “To you, and you, it must not happen/To stand tall, stand very tall,/whatever the tide, change the world” (22). Every word in this stanza has almost telegraphic precision about it as well as associations that belong to the encyclopedia of the poetic experience. Ofeimun is a craftsman of a high order and keeps a tight control of his use of words. His poetry contains repetition sometimes for purely decorative effect, sometimes for descriptive purposes as when he emphasises the need to stop or prevent further environmental pollution which results from oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. The strength of this stanza lies in the tone of defiance and the indomitable spirit of the female freedom fighter who the persona vigorously reports each time he talks to the people.

Ofeimun is ostensibly moved by the urge to combat ecological disaster. His anger is directed at those who have destroyed the environment directly or indirectly:

Now, when they talk about the Niger Delta  
they will know neither sleep nor cover  
no longer indifferent to creeks and rivers  
the green earth defoliated by gas flares  
fishing havens blacked out by murky oil  
crops withering in the mush of toxic foil. (31)

The horror done to the environment infuses the speaker with rage against those who have despoiled the land. Ofeimun is convinced that violent resistance is necessary to deter environmental destroyers. He calls on the people to shun the tendency to resign to fate as the environment is being decimated through mindless acts of pollution.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has demonstrated the ecocritical orientation of Ofeimun’s poetry. It has shown that ecocritical poems provide access into the world of the natural environment and posit that activities of humanity can impinge on the environment thus contributing to its degradation. Ofeimun examines water pollution and its consequences to the aquatic environment. Through this depiction, the poet laments the painful condition of Niger Delta people as victims of hegemonic forces led by foreign oil companies and their collaborators in

government. Ofeimun gives several ways to handle ecological threats. By creating awareness, he encourages the people to rise to defend the environment. Ofeimun, employs the tactics of mobilization for action as a way of enlightening the people to end environmental destruction because of its consequences. The poet canvasses ecological preservation habits as response to environmental degradation. The people are instigated to fight those who pollute the environment as ways of protecting it from total ruin. The major thrust of this study has been to raise public awareness to the ecological threats that assail humanity as a way of mitigating the impact of pollution on the people. The effort of Ofeimun via his poetry should be applauded in his contribution to the protection of valuable natural assets and sustenance of human survival in a world being currently confronted with environmental destruction.

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