

# Ecocentric Paradox in Ojaide's *The Endless Song*

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## **Abstract**

*The sharp shift from literary obscurantism to the use of literature to address the societal malaise remains one of the landmarks of the second generation Nigerian poets. These poets make poetry to mean instead of to say. In spite of working hard to bridge the gap between the folk oral poetry and the modern poetry, these African poets draw the art into the people's environment and experiences, appropriating the mores, flora and fauna to give the art of poetry both nativity and locale. The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria had its multifarious effects on the Niger Deltans and the Nigerian nation as a whole. These effects, without doubt, have brought corollary effects on the Niger Delta ecology and economy, as well as the standard of living. Tanure Ojaide's *The Endless Song* is a testament on the endless woes and calamities of the Niger Delta communities in particular, and the Nigerian nation in general. This paper explores the paradox of penury in the midst of bounty, both of the oil boom and agricultural product and the creation of poverty while pretending to alleviate the same. Furthermore, the paper harnesses the unexpected and seemingly irrational experience of the masses as expressed in the choice words of ecocentric realities as replicated in *The Endless Song*. The worst the songs say is the endlessness to the nation's ordeal and the agony of socio-political and environmental landscape of Niger Deltans.*

**Key words:** Ecocentric paradox, Ecology, Ojaide, Niger Delta

## **Introduction**

Harry Garuba's research attempts a periodization of Nigerian literary production especially the poetry into first generation, championed by Okigbo, Soyinka, Clark, Okara and others, second generation Championed by Osundare, Ofeimun, Ojaide and others. This research was expanded by Pius Andesani and Chris Dunton's "Historiographic representation of third generation writing in Nigeria". (51) The differences and relationship between the first generation writing and the second generation, they note, is

the drastic change from the literary obscurantism in the use of literature to address the social malaise, especially in the political arena. Niyi Osundare in particular defines poetry as “Man's meaning to Man”. (*Songs of the Market Place*. 4) Abiola Irele in preface to *The People's Poet* notes that:

... what distinguishes Osundare's work is the tension between the two impulses that command his inspiration: on one hand, the response to immediate issues of communal life in the context of situation that his work seeks to address; on the other hand, the aesthetic imperative that he is aware places upon him the obligation to give artistic form to his mode of response. (xvii).

This is a truism among the second generation poets. Odia Ofeimun, another voice of the generation, is known for his challenge to the apolitical tradition of the poetry of the earlier generation. Ofeimun, in his first collection of poems *The Poet Lied*, stirred a whirlpool of issues in the Nigerian polity. With these verses, he gives a frank assessment of the Nigerian postcolonial era. His other poetry collections follow in the same vein.

Tanure Ojaide, a poet of the second generation, remains a voice to reckon with from the Urhobo ethnic extraction of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. His poetry, in spite of its inclination to the postcolonial politics of the Nigerian nation, has built its cultural integrity in illuminating the environmental issues and economic impoverishment in the midst of national programmes of poverty alleviation and development. Most important is his concern for the devastation unleashed upon the local populace through oil exploration activities, the plight of the victims and the government's nonchalant attitude to the future of these people that are producing the wealth of the nation. Philip Onoriode Aghaghovwia notes that, Ojaide's poetry is not only engaging because of its technical qualities but also because of its cultural integrity. (180) Juliana Diabuah and Mary Okoh, describe Ojaide as “a committed poet, who portrays himself as the conscience of contemporary Nigerian Society in the poems”. For them, Ojaide uses poetry as a protest against hunger, political tyranny and corrupt practice. (452) Tijan Sallah has shown that “if there is a persistent and unifying theme in most of Ojaide works, it is a single minded detestation of tyrants with an obsessive commitment to social justice. (20)

The most import fact in the poetry of Ojaide is the representation of the

environmental imperatives in the experiences of the poet's personae. The Niger Delta region is endowed with physical environmental images both in religion and agriculture, which are incorporated with the daily activities and way of life of the people. These images are centred on land. Land as has been observed by Alu, Nesther A and Suwa, Vashti Yusuf, is central to Uhrobo politics and culture.

They believe that it is an important gift from a deity, "the eternal mother, and the water-goddess". It is a spiritual gift that should be protected with all sense of seriousness which reveals the spiritual perspective the conflict has attained in some Niger Delta communities.  
(133)

Ojaide's poems are rooted in the environment and the socio-political experiences of the Niger Delta societies.

The study of the relationship between literature and environment is termed Ecocriticism. Ecocritical inquiry takes many forms and is often interdisciplinary. Ecocritics and theorists raise questions like: how is nature represented in literature? Are the characters and setting consistent with the flora and fauna of the locale? How does the writer's metaphor of the environment-based creativity influence the way he treats it? Are the experiences represented typical of the life of an average man or woman in the setting society? Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *Introduction to the Ecocriticism Reader* note:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land: as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. (5)

However, the word "ecocriticism" has been traced back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". This apparently remained dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting in Coeur d'Alene. Ecocriticism is concerned with locating the literary work and its entities in space, time and social context, relative to the physical space. It works within the broad concept peculiar to the Landscape, Place, Region, Urban, Rural,

## Nature and Environment as represented in the literary artifact.

Tuur Kadri presents four methods of literary ecocriticism as elaborated by Cheryll Glofelty and Michael McDowell as: re-reading of representations of nature in the canonized literature, representation of pure nature and man's experiences of the wilderness reflected in books, semiotics especially bio and ecosemiotic and using ecological terminology. (179-180) One thing to note is Egudu, Romanus has pointed out that, literature is “a mode or method of expression”. (1) So is poetry as a genre of literature. Poetry makes use of imagery, rhythm and sound. Shakespeare, in his conception of the poet and poetry especially, as expressed through Thesus in *A mid Sumer Night Dream* opines that:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling  
Doth glance from heaven, from earth to heaven  
And as imagination bodies forth the forms of things  
unknown the poets pen Turns them to shapes and gives to  
airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name. (Act V. Sc.1)

Poetry generally is a source of inspiration, but the poet appropriates the elements of the environment to give it local habitation, thereby immortalizing poetry with human experiences, human conditions and history within human environment. Poetry is language, and human experience is present in language. Such human experiences are expressed in all human languages, but most palpable in poetic text, working with metaphors and images. In other words, ecocriticism enables a connection between literature and the locale. In ecocritical analysis, the emphasis is often on literary or artistic expression of human experiences within the locale using the people's flora and fauna to articulate their joy, pains and aspirations. The experiences are primary in a nature and consequently in a culturally shaped world explicitly illustrating: the joy of abundance, sorrow of deprivation, hope for harmonious existence with the tears of loss and disaster. Michael P. Cohen adds that, “Ecocriticism offers a broad vision of life and our place in nature. This is the people's culture and it is a refuge from life in nature, not a part of it. (2)

Any study of Niger Delta literature must consider the two major periods of the inhabitants life and experiences: before the discovery of crude oil and after the discovery of crude oil. Prior to the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta region, and its subsequent ascension as the mainstay of the Nigerian

National Economy, the Niger Delta region was relatively peaceful. Orazulike maintains that; “the yield from the exploitation of the natural environment, (comprising of four main ecological zones, Mangrove, Fresh water Swamp forest, Coastal Barrier Island and Low land, Rainforest) was adequate for the subsistence and commercial needs of the people”. (3)

Farming and fishing sustained the Niger Delta region, both before and after their encounter with the European. The various forms of trade engaged in by the people of the region represent an in-depth knowledge of commerce and industry. The Niger Delta as well as other people of Nigeria had contact with the Europeans in the Fifteenth century through trade and religion. The trade on slaves was abolished in the Nineteenth century, consequently, the European traders shifted to trading in palm produce, pepper, ivory, and other articles of raw material for European industries. Before middle Nineteenth century, these trades were concentrated in Lagos and Delta Ports of old Calabar, Brass and Bonny. Internal squabbles developed only when the European traders wanted to bypass the middle men for the hinter lands, which led to the British involvement in the local politics, yet the dwellers of the Niger Delta were intact and united in the entire struggle to control the trade. (Orazulike, 5)

The farm and other Agricultural crops were yielding and nurturing the local populace of the region, until the discovery of crude oil reserves in 1956 at Oloibiri in the present day Bayelsa State by Shell D'Arcy known as Shell Petroleum Development Company and the subsequent exploration of the same by the Nigerian nation in 1958.

After the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region, there was a massive transformation of the agro-based economy of the nation to an oil based economy. The first shipment of this liquid gold in 1958 was 5,100 barrel per day (bpd). (Orazulike, 7) But today, Nigeria has over 11 major oil co-operations operating in over 159 oil fields and 1,481 oil wells in the Niger Delta and they produce an average of 36 billion barrels of crude oil per day (bpd). Based on this statistics, it is on record that the Nigerian economy is 80% oil based or more and the over 80% of the total oil production of the Nigerian nation is from the Niger Delta region. (Orazulike, 11) But the question remains, how has the goose that lay this golden egg been treated both in benefiting from this natural blessing from God and in the management of the adverse effects of oil exploration in the homes or farms as well as other

social and economic aspects of life in and around the Niger Delta region, Orazulike, Chidi captures it thus;

After the discovery of crude oil reserves in the region in 1956, the serenity that hitherto characterized the area gradually evaporated and the dark clouds of curse of “crude oil” began to envelope the Niger Delta region. Each day for 17520 days millions of barrels of dark liquid gold were extracted from under their feet. They hear it is worth a lot of money, but they wallow in abject poverty. They hear it is used to generate electricity but they live in darkness, they hear a lot of wonders performed with the same dark substance that has only brought them pains, suffering and death. Only a few works in the oil companies because a large majority has been isolated from centres of education. (3)

Instead of this black substance to better the lives of the Niger Deltans as it does to the nation's economy, what the host communities know is that, sometimes oil spillage covers their rivers and creeks without alternative drinking water, it covers the sites of their age long fishing occupation without alternative job opportunity or source of income. The black gold often covers their land and farm, killing the crops on the land, depriving the communities of vital land for subsistence farming without alternative source of food and meat. They see the “devils fire” that burns day and night from huge furnaces that shoot into the sky as an inexplicable albatross (Orazulike, 3), this blessing to the national economy becomes curse to the Niger Delta economy.

The environmental condition crept into the literature. Many writers from Niger Delta region and outside recapture the situation either in Prose, Play or Poetry; Isidore Okpewho *The Tides* (2003) Izuka *The Travail of the Black gold* (2002) Ejike *Oil at my Backyard* (2001) to mention but a few. Tanure Ojaide was born to Urhobo parents from Okpara Inland in Agbon Kingdom of Delta State of Nigeria. He has more than twenty collections of poetry and other works in other genres of literature. *The Endless Song* is among his earliest collection published by Malthouse Press Limited in 1988. This is a collection of 48 poems divided into five parts: Endless song, Looking out, The Encounter, Lessons and Clearing. “Endless song” which bears the title of the collection seems to be the summary of the entire book. Bassey Ude Bassey sees *the Endless Song*, especially the section “‘looking out' as 'bristles'

with indignation at the political leader”. (171)

One cannot divorce politics from the poetry of Ojaide. Politics and environment are bedrock of Ojaide's poetry. This ranges from the land politics at Uhrobo land to the Nigerian politics. *The Endless song* has its crust on the ad infinitum of the national crisis as well as the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta region. Added to this fact is the government's rhetoric and empty promises that are never realized. The poet drawing from this age long experience of the people in spite of the government of the day decries what seems to be a play on the fate of his people and the ineptitude of the government and the agents. Bate Besong observes that, “Ojaide makes the art of poetry to show a depth of feeling and universal sentiment as well as being fully placed in the context of the economic, social and political relationships to which they refer”. (11)

Beyond the above, Ojaide employs environmental metaphor to accentuate the people's rejection of tyranny and the tyrant, both in the folklores and in the contemporary. Ogiso is said to be a dynasty of Benin Obas. In Uhrobo oral tradition, Ogiso is portrayed as the most tyrannical of the Obas before Uhrobo migrated down. (*The Endless Song*, 6) Ojaide employs the historical stories, folklore tales and traditionally known tales and figures to address their replicas in the contemporary society. Carefully, Ojaide juxtaposes the political events, speeches and anticipations of the people and the structures on ground to caution the adverse effects in the Nigerian nation as well as the Niger Delta region.

Abrams defines paradox, “as a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd”. (209) Paradox is considered as the unexpected and seemingly irrational or impossible. Ferguson's *New Dictionary of Theology* categorizes paradox into three: verbal paradox, logical paradox and Ontological Paradox.

Verbal paradox is the use of words which by linking ideas that look incompatible challenges fresh thinking and prompt new questions as in “We keep watch, over them” Ojaide makes a statement that reflects verbal paradox:

Our will is the Iroko tree rooted in our hearts.  
It survives whatever storm ravages us.  
We can hold to ourselves



and laugh cynically at our tormentors;  
we know more than the beast terrorizing us  
that will fall into a deep hole  
as the cavort in our streets (*The Endless Song*,5)

This statement raises a lot as linked ideas like the idea of “tormentor” and “Iroko tree in the heart” that one may be prompted to ask question like “who are the tormentors, are they internal or external bodies?” Thus, showing that the statements in verbal paradoxes are often resolved by explanation and reformation.

The second category of paradox is logical paradox. This is apparently self-contradictoriness in assertions about matters of fact. Ferguson maintains that, “since Zero the stoic argued that distance is infinitely divisible, and you must pass through each segment of it before reaching the next one, the hare can never over take the tortoise”. Or again: in affirming that I always lie, can I be telling the truth? (if yes, then no) considering syllogism and the premises of term, something cannot be, and be at the same time. The chameleon cannot change the colour in spite of the sugar coated rhetoric. This form of paradox is reflected in “the Uncovered Grave” we have this

From plebean experience no king knows his heir, none  
of the princes knows his- prospects  
while his father lives, In trials each perform so wonderfully  
In his turn contest has no end  
In the lifetime of their father : (*The Endless Song*,7)

In the last stanza, he repeats the first line but concluded it with “pity them kings and princes, Who look to death as a great prize: (*The Endless Song*, 7) The first premise stands out that in the land of the poet persona, “no king knows his heir”, also the prince does not know who he is succeeding, hence he is not touched by the death of the king because he does not know him, while the king is not in any way worried because he does not know his successor.

Ontological paradox is the third in the category. This form of paradox is the seeming incompatibility of statements describing reality, or inferences drawn from those statements. Sometimes, this form of paradox is categorized as oxymoron. Ontological paradox brings two opposing terms in the same statement. In the poem “for my love” the first two lines illustrates this form of



paradox: "We witness miracles that relieve other lands of misery, /Miracle archived in the hearts of those who bear pain" (*The Endless Song*, 9) In the last three lines of the poem, we witnessed another example: "I sing of the moment with its own warriors angered/ by a million abuses of freedom, of human love; I sing of this day with its arsenal of a common will." (*The Endless Song*, 9)

Most important in *The Endless Song* is the adoption of each category of paradox in order to buttress the fate and experiences of the Niger Delta region. Sometime two or more categories of paradox are used to express the people's predicament. In the first poem "Endless Song" the poet persona in the midst of his ordeals anticipated a change yet in spite of the proposals and celebration of better days, the pains of the persona remains. Disappointed the persona says, I celebrate with them/ their zestful meeting with longing// I thirst for that draught / that will fill me boundless joy. (*The Endless Song*, 1) The question remains, has he got this joy? He counts the meeting a blessing and because of his hasting to be part of the meeting he bruised his feet on the stone-path. With all these ordeals, he still traverses the earth with a feather talisman for protection because he has no trust for those attending the meeting. The image of talisman is also echoed in the poem "in the closet" the paradox used denotes the insecurity of life and property in this region. The poet persona considering the unfulfilled promises says,

We have witnessed smiles impregnated  
With steel and stone  
Witnessed the metamorphosis  
Of salt and oil  
In the growth of the hungry.  
Always the helpless wears his talisman  
Outside his arm.  
Nakedness is his armour, forthright;  
There's Succour as breath is about to fail.  
My closet of metal always accumulates steel  
and stone accumulates strength with patience (*The Endless Song*,  
4)

The experience of this region, unlike other parts of the nation remains absurd. The wealth of the nation is got from their land, the oil spillage sometimes destroys their farms yet they remain underdeveloped. In a paper "Oil the curse of a people" Orazuluike, Chidi observes that,

An acknowledgement of the short fall in developmental expectations and the need to take care of this goose that lays the golden egg is demonstrated by the effort of successive administrations at establishing various Boards and Commissions to improve the social infrastructural and economic lives of the people. The efficiency of these various establishments are, however seriously hampered by unfavourable political consideration and inadequate funding. (59)

Ojaide in “the encounter” section juxtaposes the experience of the ecological victims before the discovery of oil and after the discovery in the poem “in the beginning”, he carefully applied the Ontological paradox to define the margin between the fertility of the land before the oil exploration and this period of oil exploration. In the poem mentioned above he says.

Those who see the Oghiriki tree in the rain forest  
know that there was once the centre of a town.  
given up by men who failed their praise names...  
somewhere on the way we must have called  
to advance when the way was there  
But stood our ground not  
to be taken for mangy dogs  
even in days when obedience brought luck.  
In the beginning bloomed the seeds of our mean harvest  
( *The Endless Song*, 14)

The “lesson” section reveals the disappointment between what is expected and what is received. Ojaide persona draws from the verbal paradox in the lines of the poem. In the poem “the bridge”, the poet persona laments on the unrealized anticipation thus;

I cross the bridge of deep waters with vision  
of star drinking from the moon-lake...  
My soles conditioned by the climate of many soils.  
I, who have tasted the honey of different landscapes,  
Follow the compulsion of my feet through worlds  
that give way to other worlds...( *the Endless Song*, 30)

Other poems in this section express these ordeals of the people. “Emergency Kit” like others describes the unending situation of their pains and sufferings

When I find myself among a laughing tribe,  
I know they hide something from me  
I conjure up laughter box whose button I press  
To out laugh them all. As long as they hear their music  
they leave me free: I don't want to surrender all I have  
So when a hunter stalks me to fill his bag.  
I call on my snake from nowhere to bite him.  
Folks, let's drink ourselves to death in the party  
As long as we wear sponges in the tongue  
Let's stay awake in our unending dream so that nobody  
will take us for gone and cheat us out of our lives.  
(*The Endless Song*, 40)

The last section is “Clearing”. In this section, Ojaide compares the experience to that of the colonial era where the colonial masters in sugar coated rhetoric of Christianity and Commerce takes what rightfully belongs to a people and exile their king. The experience of Oba Ovoramwen Nogbaisi of the Benin Kingdom is represented in the poem “Oba Ovoramwen” who did all he could to protect the land from the British Colonialist but at last was exiled to Calabar and his land taken:

As the priest rose from the shine at sundown  
They sighted the white barbarians. The strangers  
entered Benin, decimated a populace prone to blood  
and took the oba yet to hear of his latest sacrifice  
to Calabar To Calabar the mind always blew them  
(*The Endless Song*, 45)

Ojaide's “London” is a bulk of expression and paradoxical statement used to decry the tormentors of the people. This poem exposes the inhumanity and hypocrisy of the tormentors either in the suit of colonialist or the ties of the Neocolonialist The poet persona tells the tormentors that, they used the Blacks as sample of underdevelopment yet whatever is developing them as well as sustaining their development is from the same Blacks world:

Your mouth has been a blade with which you axed away my pride  
And reduced me to a manikin in your playhouse  
You robbed me at house, then drilled me with mean order

I have not only been the Black sample to children,  
but jimmy to old women a token species...  
The austerity at the palace is unprecedented.  
and yet everything from a discussed car to a castle is royal.  
You have become sterile with age and misdeeds...  
Your past has caught up with you, and who

Will bet a penny on your remaining years? (*The Endless Song*, 48)  
With the use of verbal paradox, Ojaide denounces the activities of the colonialist

In conclusion, Ojaide's *The Endless Song* remains a testament, both in its merits as poetry of the second generation poets of Nigeria and in its grandeur as subtle adaptation of the various stripes of paradox with ecocentric realities to buttress the experiences and ordeals of the Niger Delta communities and the Nigerian nation in general. The East African poet Okot P'Bitek has drawn our attention to the tendencies of literature to reflect our mood and feelings without pretence and expose our true nature:

Like laughter and crying, literature is first and foremost an expressive activity. The joy or sorrow of human hearts finds way out through song. When the poison tripped darts of sadness strike the heart of the listener of the song, he groans and shares the sufferings of the singer: when the story teller strips off our garment of pretence and we are exposed as we really are, in the person of elephant-the bully-we laugh at ourselves. When our hopes and dreams are realized and the poet expresses our feelings in his song, our heart are filled with exhilaration. (22)

The collection of poems is identified as a vivid creative representation of the people's thought, aspiration and hopelessness in the midst of the oil economy that so enriched the nation but has paradoxically brought so much poverty and penury among the goose that laid the golden egg. Ojaide carefully shows mastery of the people, their environment and experience, these he reflects in the art of poetry with the appropriate paradox within the ecocentric creativity, hence, the illustration of the metaphor in Ojaide's *The Endless Song*.

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