

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BOOK PUBLISHING: A CRITICAL VIEW OF ECO-POETICS AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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*"The environment is man's first right. Without a safe environment, man cannot exist to claim other rights, be they political, social, or economic."* – Ken Saro-Wiwa.

## Abstract

The publishing of poetry are far below that of other genres of literature. The reluctance of Nigerian book publishers to accept poetry as its medium of discourse and consequent dearth of poetry text is either by design or on purpose: the bias against poetry cannot be unconnected with the undercurrent of commercial motives by publishers. Nigerian publishers give priority to the publication of course books like pre-primary, primary and secondary texts. At best, they consider popular narratives and drama with lighter themes of love, humour, comedy that entertain the readers. They neglect the grave and delicate issues like hunger, poverty and wanton exploitation and destruction of the natural environment which is of global concern. No rigorous attempt has been made to study and analyze the intrinsic qualities embedded in poetic discourse. The invaluable contribution of poetry to social change and world environmental sustainability thus remained unharnessed.

This paper intends to look at the place of nature-poetry and book publishing. Through eco-critical discourse it intends to look at the ideological and social relevance of poetry and project viable reasons why publishers should give poetry a fresh place, focus and due recognition. It will also look at the views of poets on what poetry is and its intrinsic and extrinsic value to humanity and society. Through poetry, contemporary Nigerian poets foreground the fight against wanton dislocation of Nigeria ecosystem, and through same reveal the evil of exploitation of Nigeria's natural environment. This paper will examine the way nature-poets like Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare have used poetry to promote a healthy and sustainable environment.

**Keywords:** nature poetry, publishing, eco-criticism; poverty, exploitation.

## 1.0 Introduction

In spite of substantial poetic output and the existing body of critical discourse, poetry is still largely considered as a subjective, art for art sake venture and an academic exercise devoid of any serious socio-cultural relevance today. This might account for the low esteem and cold response given to poetry by publishers. Contrary to Oscar Wilde's (1977) views that "all art is quite useless" poetry, oral or written, continues to remain relevant to its source of creative raw material – its socio-cultural setting which is the source and spring of every poetic inspiration. Poetry is not a genre of literature produced from abstractions. It is rather, a construct premised on 'art for life sake', that is poetry for social functions like funerals, marriages or occupations like hunting. The Yoruba 'ijala' are hunters' song

or chant composed and rendered for celebration and merry making. Poetry, especially Nigerian poetry, has its origin in oral poetry. It is largely rendered in social functions. When these are reduced to writing, we have dirge or elegiac poems like "The hunter dies" (Senanu & Vincent, p.283) and "Salute to the Elephant" ( Senanu & Vincent, p.18).

There is also the need to mention poems with mythic functions. The relevance of mythology to a people is that it defines, explains and gives the people a sense of one ancestry, of origin and communal spirit. Thus, we have a poem like "The Fulani Creation Story"; its first line gives an immediate picture of the central nature of 'milk' in Fulani cosmology. Cattle and its products like milk, sear-butter and hides are central to their socio, cultural and economic life: "At the beginning there is a huge drop of milk" ( Senanu & Vincent, p.24).

In the same vein, some poems with metaphysical leanings like the concept of 'Abiku', a spiritual personality believed to possess power to choose when to be born and when to die. This is prevalent among the Kwa group of language belief systems, especially the Yorubas, the Ijaws and the Igbos of Nigeria. Soyinka and Clark wrote on the same theme of 'Abiku' but from different perspective and setting. These poems are written based on the poets' experiences and imaginations which are society and innate based respectively. Because poetry is paradoxically subjective and objective in disposition, poetry is the right medium needed to reveal deeper concerns of society. This quality of poetry is outside the ambit of physical science and a state which humanities like history and sociology cannot adequately capture. Osundare succinctly explains that "poetry is what the soft wind musics to the dancing leaf, what the bee hums to the alluring nectar, what rainfall croons to the lowering eaves" (Ojaide, p.21). John Keats, in his writing on poetry, felt that it is vain to write useless papers under academic pressure. According to him "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all" (Gittings, p.46).

This study attempts to make a critical analysis of the subject of the natural environment as seen from the eyes of nature poets like Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare. Though both are from distinct cultural backgrounds from southern Nigeria, they are passionate nature-poets. Their major pre-occupation is on the celebration of the beauty of nature in arts and life on one hand, and a concern for the preservation of the natural environment on the other. How the natural environment influenced their poetic creativity, their celebration of nature and its beauty and concern for its destruction is central to this paper. From their poems we have come to appreciate the impact of human activities on their respective natural environments. This study also explores, in their poems, the unique socio-cultural elements peculiar to each environment and cosmology. We considered poems having literary elements like allusions, imagery, metaphor, contrasts and alliterations. These poems involve a contextual and inter-textual interpretation of some Nigerian poems.

## 2.0 Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature

The framework for this study is based on Eco-critical literary theory. Eco-critical theory attempts to find a meeting point between literature and the environment. It is located within the framework of eco-criticism (Barry, 1995: 249). Ecocriticism (also Green Studies) refers to a critical approach which began in USA in the late 1980s and in UK in the early 1990s respectively. Glotfeltry is considered to be the founder of this academic movement. She co-edited with Harold Freeman, a collection of essays on nature related matters titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* and also co-founded the Association of the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992, with a house journal called *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. (ISLE).

Eco-criticism celebrates the purity and the sustenance of the natural environment on one hand, and addresses man-made and natural disasters on the other. The latter are deeply problematic issues which conflict with disinterested nature of our environment. This theory emerged from an ever-increasing enlightened consciousness and concern about the state of global environment. Tiffin (2008) contends that Post-colonial studies have been involved in environmental issues, particularly in terms of relationship between humans and place, between land and language. Recently, anthropologists, geographers, historians and literary critics have shifted focus from these broad areas to relationships between neo-colonial interests and eco-critical perspective. The scramble for modernization has enticed developing countries like Nigeria into the destruction of their own environments consequently, making the destruction of the environment one of the most damaging aspects of Western Industrialization. This is a further evidence of the continuing importance of eco-critical analysis of global crises.

Locally, this theory will help to reveal the peculiarities and similarities of the natural environment and the impact this has on Nigerian poetic creativity. According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997) "Literature" and by implication poetry "does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (xv). Poetry is used to encode and communicate certain nature related

ideologies. In the same vein, Chidi Amuta (1987) highlighting the importance of social realism in African literature says that "the writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it" (46). John Haynes (1992) argues that ideology permeates every level of human endeavour such as language and social situations. It also conditions our social activities including artistic productions. Probert Fraser (2002: p.10) also affirms that the style of artistic presentation is shaped by the writer's ideology, his linguistic choice and world view. These views remain true to Nigerian nature-poems. These poems have social relevance. Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry* contends that "With poetry, you can move stones and imbue stones with passion. With poetry, you can make stony and beastly people listen to you" (Enright & Chickera, p.4). Mathew Arnold, an English educator and Poet, considering socio-cultural conflict of his day, believed that poetry in particular, will one day, come to help resolve all human generated conflicts. Placing his theory in a spiritual context, in his books *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), *Culture of The Best* and *The Study of Poetry* (1880.), Arnold's central idea was that, apart from its aesthetic and pleasing qualities, poetry has important things to teach humanity. He foresaw a crucial semi-religious role for poetry. He argued that mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us and even to sustain us. According to Arnold, without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes for religion and philosophy will be replaced by Poetry. He prophetically foresaw a tomorrow where science, poetry and religion will combine to make our world sure. He argued that English culture of the 1850's is seriously threatened by a process of secularization, the threat of class struggle and culture persuasiveness of scientific thinking, especially Darwin's theory of evolution which confronts religion.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century world is beset by a more grievous challenge than that of Arnold - the violation of our kinship with nature and a possible extinction of the eco-system. I conclude with this quotation by Margaret Mead: (1978): "We are living beyond our means. As a people we have developed a life-style that is

draining the earth of its priceless and irreplaceable resources without regard for the future of our children and people all around the world".

### 3.0 Analysis of nature-poetics

This part of the study is divided into three. They will be located within two broad headings: nature and society. While part one examine the negative consequences of environmental devastation, part two examines social problems occasioned by the forces of globalization and modernity, and part three examines poetry and national consciousness.

#### 3.1 The Poetics of Impoverished Nigerian Natural Environment

At the heart of the struggle for participatory, environmental governance is the question of resource control. O.A. Mayowa, the Nigerian political scientist has said that violence and ethnic agitation in Nigeria can be described from environmental and economic perspectives (Mayowa, 2001: 1). The searchlight of eco-poetics is on the consequences of this interplay of social politicking on the Nigerian natural environment. Following such a polluted socio-economic landscape, Nigerian writers have risen to the occasion. They employ art to address as well as to bring to the knowledge of humanity this form of environmental devastation and inhumanity. As an environmentally conscious poet, Ojaide for example allows the social facts in his lived environment to find expression in his art. This trademark is also characteristic of the style of the martyred poet and eco-activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was killed by the Sanni Abacha's military regime. Before his death, upon winning the 1995 Goldman Environmental prize for campaigning against oil companies' environmental destruction in his native Ogoni land, he sent the following message from prison:

The environment is man's first right. Without a safe environment, man cannot exist to claim other rights, be they political, social, or economic (Microsoft Encarta, 2009).

The shared interest and inheritance of these poets is clearly expressed in Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs*:

The inheritance I sat on for centuries  
Now crushes my body and soul...  
My nativity gives immortal pain  
Masked in barrels of oil -  
Breaking the peace of centuries

& tainting not only a thousand rivers,  
 My lifeblood from the beginning,  
 But scorching their sacred soil was  
 debauched  
 By prospectors, money-mongers?

My birds take flight to the sea,  
 The animals grope in the burning bush... (p. 21).

The poem above tells of the horrors and tragedies of multinational corporations' presence and activities in the Niger delta region of Nigeria. Their activities crush the biodiversity of this region. Ojaide also highlights the damage done to the flora of his native natural environment in his poems 'The AT & P, Sapele':

When I first entered the AT & P  
 On excursion from St. George's,  
 It was next to the largest sawmill  
 On earth...

The planks smelt fresh,  
 Sardine-packed for export;  
 They came in raft by water...

When decades later I went home  
 To the delta of hardwood,  
 A big clearing welcome me ... (p.30).

And in the collection: '*When It No Longer Matters Where You Live*' and '*Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*' Ojaide called forth pictures of the socio-physical disaster, the deplorable condition of man and the fauna:

Choking from the season's flagellation,  
 droves of wailers comb the breath of the  
 land...

Wild fires consumed barks and herbs  
 What are the chances of catching the lion  
 alive...? (p. 77).

Dogs will never shed enough tears  
 to tell their sorrow,  
 goats will never sweat enough in a rack  
 to show the world their desperation.  
 Babies suffocate from the game  
 of loveless elders of state... (p. 70).

These poems paint a gory picture of the state and condition of the local plants and animals. They draw attention to the way the environment, human beings and animals are being maltreated by the politicians or 'elders of state': the polluted atmosphere, the choking in the air and the battered environment; 'the gnarled barks of trees', 'babies' and 'goats' point to the perils of deforestation and the evil of imperialism wrought via gas flaring and oil leaks in the Niger Delta and Nigeria by extension. Ojaide likened this loss of feeling for nature with decline of poetry as a genre, since he reckons that the basic function of poetry is to spur and to educate. Consequently, he considers the eco-critical art of poetry as a kind of public duty, which he owes to the Nigerian people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Above all Ojaide uses literature for environmental purposes. He places premium on the biotic community – its sustainability and preservation. His is a poetic blueprint that is environmentally conscious and ecologically sensitive to the plights of the people and their environment.

Glissant E, the Caribbean writer, offered a statement to corroborate this literary pattern: that Ojaide is committed to "aesthetic of the earth" (Glissant, 1997: 149). In this light-also, Aldo Leopold, the American ecologists, in his *A Sand County Almanac* said that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. (Leopold, 1966: 262). One distinct aspect of this study is that eco-poetics ex-rays and presents nature related themes in clear and unambiguous pictures, without cultural or regional bias. It stands in battle against a new type of global colonial and neocolonial conspiracy against the entire earth's ecosystem.

### 3.2 Eco-Poetry and Social Degradation

Poverty is a situation or experience of being poor. It is an indubitable fact that poverty has continued to be a challenge to governments and world bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF. These bodies combat the problem of lack and environmental degradation at continental and national levels. Poverty is a reflection of the harsh realities of a nation that cannot feed itself; and Africa, especially Nigeria is not an exception. There is today abject poverty in the urban and rural areas of Nigeria. Contemporary Nigeria is

witnessing a new kind of colonialism – eco-colonialism. Humanity has turned from exploitation of its kind to the destruction of the eco-system. The consequent result is earth warming and rise in sea level. Industrialists are parasitic: they suck and drain the earth of its interior and exterior natural resources and deplete the natural environment with chemical wastes, water, air pollution. In Nigeria, the hardest hit is the Niger Delta region. In the Delta area, where petroleum oil is being drilled, armed conflict and oil spillage have helped to compound the problems of the already impoverished populace.

In contemporary Nigeria the average Nigerian child goes to bed hungry and many parents are not gainfully employed and cannot afford to send their children to school. Nigerian mothers today combine their primary role child care upbringing with job outside the home with consequent neglect of the home-front. Energy and communication are the bedrock of any modern economy. In Nigeria many industries have not been able to remain in business due to lack of electricity supply. Electricity has remained a challenge even to small scale entrepreneurs; and the average Nigerian home cannot boast of an hour of uninterrupted electricity supply. In fact, Nigeria has become 'a nation of portable generators', what with the attendant noise pollution and explosions from adulterated fuel which causes bodily harm and destruction to properties. Bamidele Aderemo(1992) in his article 'Niyi Osundare's poetry and the Yoruba oral artistic tradition', describes it as "fraud on a pervasive large scale, inefficiency and mismanagement in high places with the masses bearing the burden...of the leaders"(p52). The consequences of these social problems are emotional breakdowns, broken homes, disoriented and frustrated youths who find solace in drug addiction, crime and prostitution. Ajegunle is a settlement of the deprived in the suburb of Lagos, southwest of Nigeria. It is typified by squalor and crime, drunks and filth in contrast to Victoria Island and Ikoyi - two elitist settlements growing side by side with Ajegunle. It symbolizes and gives a vivid picture of poverty in a typical Nigerian town. This contrast of poverty and affluence in Lagos State, presents a picture of socially stratified communities living side by side in a nation blessed with human and natural

resources. This is an unwritten culture of separate development inherited from our colonial masters and which our post independence leader refuse to shed off for obvious reasons, with attending negative consequences of depravity.

Kegbara Dere and Bigbara Dere are twin villages in Rivers State of Nigeria; they stand side by side in irony of poverty and wealth: While oil drilling and environmental degradation is going on at their backyard, the villagers go hungry parents with kwashiorkor ridden children, farming on oil-socked land and scratching the earth for roots. They plant food crops but they are largely meant for cities like Port Harcourt, for higher prices. These are snap shots of a dying community on a suffocating natural environment. This is symbolically represented in a person poem 'Fruits and Flowers for Mummy'. Osundare in his poem 'A Song for Ajegunle' argues that neglecting it as secondary social problem is only postponing the dooms day:

I saw you sprawled out  
like a cat with hidden claws...  
cesspool of brewing rage  
I saw you sprawled out  
like a wounded snake.

He sees Ajegunle as an example of a typical Nigerian city, "a long forgotten city"(pp.5-6).

Villages are turned into ghost communities, as children of such settlements leave home for the cities for greener pastures. In his *The Eye of the Earth*: ('They too are the earth')Lines 2-5, 8, 18, 20 and 21, Osundare draws a grim picture of Nigerians wallowing in abject poverty. We see a people

Sprawled out in brimming gutters...  
under snakeskin shoes and Mercedes tyres...  
millions, hewing wood and hurling water...  
in narrow abandoned hamlets...  
women battling centuries of maleficent  
slavery.

"Fruits and Flowers for Mummy" is a personal poem representing a home and environment devastated by lack and a rampaging AIDS pandemic. Like Osundare's *Songs of Ajegunle*, it compares affluence and poverty standing side by side and the persona, a little child of six fending to keep his falling home standing. Poverty destroys the house: "he opened the door gently, for it is

weak, its bowels loosened by termites" (lines 39-40). Even the neighbourhood and the natural environment is not spared: "Open to the country side: "there are no flowers, no gates but broken walls, stunted roots, and grey grasses" (lines 34-35). Poverty and the pandemic has turned the community into a ghost town: "and little fresh graves adorned the only foot path"(line 36).

The poem 'From Dawn to Dusk' gives another instance of a broken home in a typical Nigerian, middle class home with an urban setting. Most parents, as the one represented here, leave home very early in the morning for work and return late at night, leaving the care of their wards to Nannies who themselves are in dire need of care: Osundare in his 'A Song for Ajegunle'(Lines 40-41) also refers to this as "Senior Service brats that murder the peace of tired nannies". 'From Dawn to Dusk' gives a snapshot of 'a broken home' and 'a broken person' par excellence. Indeed, it is a pointer to the fact that it is not only when married couples are not living together, that a home is broken, it is broken when children and wards are free to do what seems right to them, without the guardian's wise counsel. A loose and neglected child or home, and even community tends towards poverty in the absence of checks. Children, even adolescents, find unhealthy comforts outside their homes as "the children hug every warmth in the street"(line 31). Caught up in a degenerated mainstream of freedom and loose living, they get entangled in prostitutions, drug addiction and its attendant complications, like crime and HIV/AIDS. This poem reminds one of Osundare's 'A song of Ajegunle', pictures of "satanic rumbles of supperless stomachs and shoeless hordes", of "calloused hands, switched on weed-infested smile and of cholera bowels, drifting" to urban cities like Port Harcourt, Bori town and Lagos, where they add to the problem of the already saturated population. (Lines 1-2, 12, 21,36-37). Pol N Ddu asked a desperate question on this appalling state in his poem:

Here, nothing works:  
So something there must  
Be in ourselves or in our times that all  
Things working for good  
else where do not work  
In our expert hands when introduced

To our soil that is no different from other  
Lands.

(Akporobaro:376, Lines 28-32.)

Pol N Ddu satirizes our so called 'experts' who are only experts in lining their pockets and bank accounts with ill-gotten wealth to the detriment of the Nigerian citizens. Tanure Ojaide in his 'The Vision', Akporobaro(2008: p.375) sees the salvation of Nigerians from poverty coming from the people themselves. He suggested mass reaction to the effort of freeing the people from a rampaging social injustice. He argues that Nigerians must stand up against those he referred to as "leopards" that has turned the land and the people of Nigeria into a beggar nation. He suggests that if need be to "incur debts to buy new weapons or mend our broken ones(8) and fight "the leopard, that haunts us"(23). He laments Nigerian situation as a land of irony; a nation of abundant human and natural resources turned into a nation of lack and waste. Ojaide went on to ask in a determined voice: "When has the hearth that roused the lion's liver become the dump for bones combed from outside? (6-7). Like Ojaide, Osundare believes in the stubborn will of Nigerians to weather all odds. Like the earth, Nigerians will survive even though:

Here and there, every where  
A lake is killed...a poisoned stream  
stagger down hills,  
Coughing chaos in the sickly sea...  
The earth will not tremble under our feet.

Osundare(1989:Lines8-14.p50)

Albeit these scorch earth devastation, a battered and impoverished psych, the poem 'Under the Nigerian Sky', is a poem that speaks of hope:

Though grand Nannies with bony hands, bowls  
and spoon-shovels,  
Wait longingly, beside dehydrated taps,  
Their ancient rheumatic eyes wet with fresh  
tears and sweat.  
Though cots are empty, bowels empty of  
handouts and the land eating up her children,  
rain cloud will gather again.  
rivers will flow again in our veins.

This poem is a reassurance of a better, healthier Nigeria of tomorrow. In conclusion, poverty of the person and his environment is indeed a social anathema that requires a determined and urgent attention. There is need for our publishing sector to depart from the orthodox view of considering

poetry as an obscure genre without social relevance. From the examples we have given above, it is clear that poetry is and will continue to be a socially proactive and interactive discipline. Nigerian publishers will need to turn again, reassess objectively the intrinsic, inter-textual qualities and social values imbedded in nature poems, especially eco-poetry, the distinct role they can play in Nigeria and the world of today.

### 3.3 Poetry and National Consciousness.

We shall also examine how poetry is used to construct the intrigues faced by the people and the power-play of leaders among the various social groups for power. The ideology of social conflict and disjuncture that is constructed in the poems of the likes of Tanure Ojaide reveals the kind of social relationship that endangers the environment in the exploitation process. We shall, therefore, focus on the poetic strategies employed in these poems to sensitize the public and construct a discourse that broaden our awareness of the negative implication and consequences of human activities on our environment.

Nigerian-written-poetry spans about six decades from its inception, and has been a medium of engagement, decrying colonialism, cultural imperialism, socio-economic oppression and political tyranny (Nwagbara, 2008). To most African writers, there is a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. The principal function of literature is to criticize these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society (Maduka, 1981: 11). Most recently however, eco-poetics has come to the fore. The mode of poetic enterprise, called resistance poetics, which was popular among Nigerian poets is gradually taking the secondary seat. Thanks to current national awareness and consciousness of the realities of ecological imperialism in the Delta region of Nigeria, the question of environmental degradation which has brought this region to the attention of the world is foregrounded through eco-critical poetics. Tenure Ojaide is considered as the most prolific nature-poet from this area of Nigeria. Ojaide's collections like *Delta Blues & Home Songs*(1997b), *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*(1997a), *Labyrinths of the Delta*(1986), *The Blood Peace and Other Poems*(1991), *When*

*It No Longer Matters Where You Live*(1998), *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007) and *Waiting for the Hatching of the Cockerel*(2008) are illustrations of eco-critical literature. By extrapolation, Ojaide's activist artistic enterprise, finds ample expression in using poetry for resistance dialectics, which culminates in environmentalism and cultural reaffirmation. His eco-poetry is a testament to this artistic commitment (Nwagbara, 2008). According to Oyesola, (1995: 62), Niger Delta is the economic base of Nigeria and it has witnessed one of the uncanny forms of neglect and marginalization - and yet 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange comes from oil exploration, exploitation and marketing by the multinational corporation. With the welfare of Nigerians and their environment in dare jeopardy and of need of preservation and sustainability, we believe the voice of Nigerian poets especially eco-poets must not be silenced by publishers but instead promoted.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This paper through socio-critical and eco-poetic perspective has brought to the fore the relevance of poetry to the socio-cultural and political discourse in Nigeria today. Through poetry, Nigerian poets have promoted enlightenment campaign, national consciousness and concerns that touch on the scourge of poverty and environmental degradation and exploitation. We have looked at the invaluable role and significance of poetry in academic and social parlances projected by poets like Mathew Arnold, Philip Sidney, Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare. We believe that the fingers of Nigerian publishers, in this present dispensation, will not snuff out or stifle these disinterested universal voices which remained best expressed through the medium of poetry.

It is imperative that books should be driven by their ideological relevance to society and not necessarily by capital accumulation. Consequently, Nigerian publishers should see the need to encourage publication of poetry.

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## Profile

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