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OF ENGLISH, LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The Ethiope Journal of English, Literary, and Cultural Studies (ISSN: 0795-5413) is an interdisciplinary journal that explores topical and generative issues in English linguistics and literary and cultural studies. We recognise that African humanities research is both problem-based and knowledge oriented, and we aim to provide a platform for scholars to analyse and theorise Africa in a way that is generative, conversational, and decolonial. Specifically, the journal focuses on both the analytical and theoretical approaches to knowledge production in the context of Africa and the Global South. We want to curate papers that are hinged on African indigenous paradigms and approaches or that seek to extend, reimagine, or contextualise current theoretical or analytical approaches in English language studies and literary and cultural studies.

We invite papers that dwell on all aspects of English language studies, including phonetics/phonology, semantics, syntax, discourse analysis, pragmatics, stylistics, ESL, ESP, etc. We also welcome papers that theorise literary and cultural texts, including film, still and moving images, music and dance, photographs, cultural objects, spaces and places, society and social formations, and other relevant corpora. While we accept purely analytical essays, we encourage authors to focus on theorising the texts or data they engage with. In particular, we welcome theoretical conversations that implicate postcolonial subjecthood, ecocritical approaches (especially postcolonial ecocriticism), feminism and gender studies, new trends in linguistics, object-oriented criticism and approaches, and other generative approaches to knowledge production. Authors are encouraged to do original theorisation rather than adopt extant theoretical frameworks. They may also extend the scope of extant theories and approaches based on the material they present and discuss.

Furthermore, papers with interdisciplinary approaches are also welcomed. We recognise that knowledge production is an elastic phenomenon, and that bright ideas might implicate various fields. Interesting multi-modal, eclectic, or collaborative research is encouraged in this journal.

JOURNAL POLICY

The Ethiope Journal of English, Literary and Cultural Studies is published biennially by the Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria. All papers submitted to this journal will undergo double-blind peer review before publication. Published papers are well-researched, original, and data-driven.

Contributors are to submit an e-copy of their manuscript for assessment and publication to ethiopejournal@delsu.edu.ng or ethiopejournal@gmail.com. Such manuscripts should be original and not under consideration for publication elsewhere and should not have been published in any other journal.

The submitted manuscript which should not exceed 7000 words should be typeset in MS Word Times New Roman Font 12, with double line spacing. The first page should include the title of the manuscript, name(s), and institutional affiliation/address, abstract (not more than 250 words and with not more than six keywords). Manuscripts should conform to the current APA or MLA style sheet. Author(s) of published papers will derive the benefits from peer-review of contributions by seasoned scholars, global visibility, and receipt of hard copies as well as soft copies of their papers.

The papers in this edition of the journal cut across disciplines in cultural, and media studies and sub-disciplines in English and literary studies. The contributors include seasoned and renowned scholars of international repute and young astute scholars with a burning desire to excel in academics. It is pertinent to note that the journal accepts contributions from scholars and researchers across the globe. We believe that articles in this volume will be of immense interest to researchers and students.

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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ECOLOGICAL ACTIVISM IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE QUESTIONER* AND *SONGS OF MYSELF*

Aishatu, Abdulsalam

Abstract

Tanure Ojaide is an eco-activist who is against the pollution and the dislodgment of Niger-Deltans. The poet protests against socio-economic and political exploitation represented in Niger Delta. The paper evaluates identity issues and the motifs of ecological crisis in Ojaide's poetic rendition; *The Questioner* and *Songs of Myself*. The theories that explain the article's position are Ecocriticism and Sociological Critical theory. The ecocritical literary theory views the environment concerning literature. In other words, Ecocriticism looks at the interdependence of humankind and their environment and how literature intervenes to resolve contradictions in such mutual existence. The sociological critical theory that situates literature and its themes around occurrences in society. They are used to analyse crises that interrupt the peace of the people of the Niger-Deltans which represents colonial power that controls the cultural creations of the colonised. The study reveals the corruption, lack of economically viable projects in most communities of the Niger Delta area and the empowering of unpatriotic citizens of the region who have political power, and other forms of amassing illegitimate wealth through the exploitation of the environment and the masses.

Keywords: Poetics, Environment, Identity, Postcolonial, Ecocriticism.

Introduction

The poetry of Tanure Ojaide focuses on the violations of the Niger Delta space being a scion of that region. The natural endowments of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria make it the hub of mining and extractive activities on a very large scale. Multinational companies

and conglomerates are located strategically in that region to do multimillion-dollar business. It is baneful and agonizing that the activities of oil companies and associated businesses leave the land degraded and despoiled. The entire environment is polluted because of effluents from gas flaring. The waters are rendered unusable either for direct consumption or for fish farming

Ecological degradation, as also portrayed in the Niger Delta novels of Isidore Okpewho, Kaine Agary, and Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, as well as other literary genres-drama and poetry is as endemic as it is unnerving. Crises motivated by ecological degradation in the novels' settings originate from the 1950s when European businessmen and natural resources prospectors emerged in the Niger Delta region with technological tools and methods of natural resource exploitation. Since then, cultures of crises have replaced the peaceful ambience of the place, giving rise, as it were, to imbalances and disunity in the ecosystem, leading to the gross extermination of aquatic and terrestrial organisms. Persistent and intractable actions of wealthy and power-drunk individuals render ineffective efforts by Eco activists and warriors to rid the place of so much ecological mess. Frictions between these characters lead to ever-worsening environmental hazards in the place.

Applying the ecocritical technique of analysing place as it affects persons and cultures, ecological degradation is found to have more reaching effects than simple despoliation of physical surroundings. It breeds corruption, local and urban squalor, moral perversion, greed, insensitive leadership, and above all, disregard for the organic unity of all that exists. As the crises rage in defiance of all solutions, characters remain recalcitrant; accusations and counter-accusations are traded. Degradation and every resultant tremor in the place are as natural as their precursory human endeavours in science and technology, hence the final call of this paper for Eco stoicism.

Ecological degradation refers to the filth, dilapidation, ruin, humiliation, and poverty that arise from unwholesome environmental practices. This is a problem, which has, in the last one or two decades, been stressed from different parts of the world. It is an issue that has posed one of the biggest challenges of our world today;

probably not second to terrorism, endemic diseases, wars, or even corruption, since each of these, one way or the other, finds its root in the degradation of the natural environment. As human beings advance in intellectual knowledge and technical abilities, their desires grow and expand, far beyond the provision of necessities of life, to that of construction of mega structures; not simply, and necessarily for the provision of comforts, but often for mere fantasy and the luxury of aesthetic satisfaction. Mega targets are set for posterity in this same direction; so that from generation to generation, there exists in human beings the reckless urge to overthrow systems, destroy and waste existing structures to rebuild; and in every age, humanity has variant ideologies that form the bases and the desire to deconstruct as a step towards reconstruction.

The results of such innate desires and activities are dirt, pollution, squalor, etc., in the urban centres; a denuding of the local environment of its woods, states that: “From an age when nature was revered to the modern age of science and technology, humanity has been engaged in the very acts of destruction of physical structures as a step towards reconstruction”. For instance, the earth's surface has to be devastated and even denuded with high-tech instruments to achieve sophistication in architecture. Technological methods of prospecting for fossil fuels have led to a radical transformation in energy consumption, and the by-product of these activities is the prevailing global pollution of the environment. Dirt, pollution, squalor, and a denuding of the local environment through the exploitation of earth and water resources – crude oil, forest trees, and mineral deposits – become a constant reality that humans and non-human natural organisms have to grapple with.

Coupled with this is a degradation of the socio-cultural, moral, and economic structures of the physical environment. Pieces of evidence from the literary ecological settings of the novels selected for this study show that water navigation and exploitation, for instance, had emerged from the use of simple coracles, canoes, and boats to that of large ships, which increased the volume of water masses and the space occupied by them far beyond their natural capacities and boundaries. Besides, there is a continuous washing,

into the waters, of substances harmful to the existence of human and non-human organisms. The solid earth's surface is not spared. Persons and animals are sacked from their natural habitats or annihilated by toxic matters. Support literatures create further consciousness of how urban sophistications and cravings have led to the carting away, from the local environments, and resources that are meant for their preservation and the sustenance of global ecological well-being.

Shreds of evidence abound to suggest that human beings are on the verge of losing their coveted pride of place in nature as a result of their greed and insatiable quest for exploitation of natural resources at a pace faster than they are being renewed. Bina Nengi-Ilagha's *Condolences*, for instance, captures this problem, with one of its grave consequences – death and mourning. Crisis, insurrections, and counter-insurrections are the products of thoughtless exploitation and degradation of the natural ecosystem in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*. The issue of recklessness in the exploitation of crude oil resources and the attendant degradation of the Niger Delta ecosystem is further captured in this lamentation by one of the characters: "With the rivers polluted and the delicate ecosystem damaged, fishing had become unattractive. What could be happening?" (*Condolences* 153). Characters in that environment and setting of the novels are as bewildered as many of the environmental writers and critics whose voices make tremendous additions to the volume of this thesis. Owing to the global nature of the problem, many of such voices are echoed from different parts of the world.

It is no longer uncommon to read about the devastating effects of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. According to Jane Frances (1-2) "...oil spills, the contamination of the waters and lands to pipeline vandalism, kidnapping, killing, thuggery, gunrunning and a life of poverty" seems to be a normal way of life in this part of Nigeria. The deplorable way in which people live in the Niger Delta and other humiliating problems tied to environmental issues have elicited writers like Clark (1965), Ojaide (1998), Saro-Wiwa (1996), Bassey (2000), and several others to write about the disadvantages of having crude oil in their community.

Tanure Ojaide stands out as one of the prominent writers that has consistently written about the deplorable plight of the Niger Delta (Maledo, 2020). Alu and Suwa (2012) to support the claims on Ojaide's constant presentation of environmental-related themes, state that Ojaide advances concern for the environment and the consequences of such unfortunate predicaments (environmental pollution) of his people (Orhero 2). Osborne (54) reiterates the views of scholars earlier mentioned but adds that despite the continuous degradation of the Niger Delta areas, the people of the Niger Delta are deeply tied to their land. Furthermore, Sadek (90) contends that the displacement of indigenous Niger-Deltans from their homes; the loss of land for economic gains, and the loss of traditional identities are all directly connected to the aftereffects of colonial control of Nigeria by former British colonialists, thus with the exploitation of the lands in the Niger Delta, people from that area are displaced, alienated and strip bear of their inheritance. Eventually, the indigenous people of the Niger Delta live as exiles on polluted lands that were once sacred.

How one local environment is affected differs from the way others are affected. As such, different perspectives on ecological lamentation were sought and documented. The lament, which had been so loudly echoed in such diverse fields of study as geography, ecology, biology, and the rest of the physical and behavioural sciences discovered to have, in the last decade and a half, gained momentum in literary studies and writings. Bits and pieces of these are reflected in this paper as each contributes to an understanding of issues in the poems.

Songs of Myself and *The Questioner* are two of Ojaide's recent collection of poems that features Ojaide's years of consistent protest against the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta. His poems are also considered to be a repertoire of traditions so etched to criticise the oil-soaked Delta. Much of Ojaide's poetry consistently dwells on the paradox of oil wealth that is a blessing turned doom, a curse rather than a source of joy for his people and region. Strong strains of lamentation and nostalgic evocation for what was once an idyllic environment, but is now greatly damaged, are also found in his poetry. Tanure Ojaide's poetry presents multi-layered themes,

wrought in contemporary reality. The poet discusses the themes of historical realities, political images, grandmother persona, rural dexterity, the degradation of the lands of the Niger Delta, and love. Ojaide once professed that he carries part of the Delta along with him wherever he goes. Perhaps, this attachment to his motherland makes him write profusely about his love of his people despite his many years in foreign lands. In one of his interviews, Ojaide attests that he carries along with him sceneries of the Delta in “My roots thus run deep into the delta area...Home remains for me the Delta, where I continue to anchor myself” (*World Literature Today*, 15 Winter, 1994).

It is therefore not surprising that yet again, Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* and *The Questioner* caution people on the ways to behave in an “ecological and environmentally damaged Niger Delta” (Ojaide 6). Although, reviews and analyses of both collections, have been made through other theories and especially to critique environmental degradation; for this study, the theoretical meaning of the postcolonial tropes of identity and culture will be used to analyse Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* and *The Questioner* to decipher determinants that influence the identity and culture of a people fragmented by economic and political exploitation and abandonment by oil explorers and corrupt government officials. From the preceding, this study aims to uncover how the persona in the works overcome a haunted past to locate their unique identities to reinvigorate a dying culture of communal life and respect.

Theoretical framework

Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how human beings' relationship with their physical environment is reflected in literature. The major focus was on how the poets used and depicted aspects of nature and for what reasons. the literary theory known as Ecocriticism will be deployed. It is one of several theories used in literary studies to increase understanding and awareness about an area of research. In particular, Ecocriticism is interested in the way that literature helps to resolve issues between humankind and the environment in which they live.

Literature and ecology grapple with unlocking the problems bedevilling humankind in their daily living in an environment that is badly affected by the actions and inactions of humankind who, in the first place, should be interested in making the environment an Eldorado. In many of his poems, Ojaide speaks powerfully against the destruction of nature. In Ojaide's works, socio-economic inequalities and ecological damage are interlinked with political corruption, despotism, and mismanagement of economies.

It is no longer unusual to hear about the devastation caused by oil exploration and extraction in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Maledo (39) asserts that Ojaide's poetry was among the first to draw attention to the effects of oil exploration and exploitation in the region. According to Frances (1-2), "...oil spills, water and land contamination, pipeline vandalism, kidnapping, killing, thuggery, gunrunning, and a life of poverty" appear to be a regular way of life in this part of Nigeria. The deplorable living conditions in the Niger Delta region, as well as other humiliating problems related to environmental issues, have prompted writers such as Clark (1965), Ojaide (1998), Saro-Wiwa (1996), Bassey (2000), and others to write about the drawbacks of having crude oil in their community, with Ojaide standing out as one of the prominent writers who has consistently written about the deplorable living conditions.

According to Orhero (2), Ojaide mixes Urhobo folklore and philosophy as a method of conveying the Urhobo people's worldview to the world while also drawing attention to the awful situations of his people as a result of environmental deterioration. In support of his claims about Ojaide's constant presentation of environmental-related themes, Orhero quotes Alu and Suwa (23): "Nester Alu and Vashti Suwa assert that Ojaide 'advances concern for the environment and the consequences of such unfortunate predicaments (environmental pollution) of his people.'" Osborne (44) reiterates the earlier listed authors' conclusions but adds that despite the continual deterioration of the Niger Delta areas, the people of the Niger Delta are deeply tied to their lands.

Furthermore, Sadek (90) contends that the displacement of indigenous Niger-Deltans from their homes, the loss of land for

economic gain, and the loss of traditional identities are all directly related to the aftereffects of former British colonialists' colonial control of Nigeria and that with the exploitation of the lands in the Niger Delta, people from that area are displaced, alienated, and deprived of their inheritance. Finally, the indigenous peoples of the Niger Delta are forced to live as exiles on polluted lands that were once sacred. Okunoye (772) defines Ojaide's work as a sort of "Afrocentrism" that Ojaide uses as a poetic license to spread African cultural heritage, whilst Okome and Gomba (8) contend that Ojaide's poetry represents a people's determination to overcome pains as a result of oil politics of neglect to resist the hegemonic policies of postcolonial dialectics which is a modern-day extension of colonialist control.

In reading Ojaide's work via the psychoanalytical framework there have been several studies which include amongst others, research such as Awuzie (2017), Mustafa (2019), Orhero & Udo (2019), Kalejaiye (2022), and others. While Awuzie (85-86) in a psychoanalytic study of Ojaide's works asserts that Ojaide's poetry evokes archetypal images and themes in the mind of his persona as a means of illustrating the pains, worries, and joys that the people of the Niger-Delta go through daily, Orhero and Udo (74) and Mustafa (137) on the other hand, all argue that the need to establish an identity irrespective of the trauma and disillusionment the people of the Niger-delta experience in recent times exceeds the shame, disgust, and disappointment they experience due to environmental degradation.

Having looked at other scholars' criticism of Ojaide's poems, it is this study's observation that almost all the earlier mentioned scholars interrogate Ojaide's poetry through African aesthetics, folklores and folktales, Marxism, orality, ecocriticism, and even via the psychoanalytical theory. However, the difference between this study and the previous ones is that Ojaide's poetry as analysed in this essay can be conceived as an adjunct for understanding the formation of identities of people who are subjected to conflictual existence as a result of the degradation and exploitation of their environment by a set of greedy, exploitative and oppressive individuals and

organisations. It is thus the objective of this essay to understudy more closely the result of developing identities that are tied to conflicts, devastation, poverty, and the absence of a sense of being in a place that has lost its homeliness.

Environmental Motifs in Ojaide's *Songs of Myself*

Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* is a representation of a female population that trickles into self-confinement described as the exile island. It shows that many women are emotionally depressed in their forced marriages while many others are stigmatized for standing against such inhumanity. Other poems in *Songs of Myself* suggest female reproductive health issues as complications due to environmental pollution. In the textual Niger Delta, women/environmental relationships are recognized with the implications of that relationship noted in the poems discussed subsequently.

Come and Spend a Day With Me in *Songs of Myself* buttresses the issues of female reproductive health challenges against the detrimental outcome of environmental pollution. The voice in *Come and Spend a Day With Me* is a husband's story. It calls on the readers to come and be a witness to the people's plight. It says from the opening, "Come and spend a day with me / see my wife close to her term / see me prepare for my firstborn" (stanza 1, lines 1–3). Couched in a desperate tone, the husband relates what the couple has experienced in their fertility quest. Culturally, no man invites another to come and see his wife close to her term, he would rather invite his friend to come and see his newborn baby. The persona's mother is equally encapsulated in worry and, thus, anxious to see her grandchild. The entire household prays ceaselessly for a safe delivery because according to the husband, his wife has suffered many miscarriages resulting from hormonal complications. The persona continues in his narration of the family's trauma saying:

always on our knees for a healthy baby
after so many malformed births around
continuously invoke the ancestors
after encountering strange happenings
in the land that raised us to this day

(stanza 2, lines 7–11)

Some statements connote history within the quotation which shows that such reproductive health issues are not peculiar to one family but as a literary voice, the persona refers to the entire Niger Delta people including him. They continuously invoke their ancestors who in many poems are said to be on the run from the afflicting environment. The persistent fertility crisis accentuates Gaard's tripartite approach to ecofeminism and life interconnectedness which recognizes the environment and the female deities as well as the female body in life-giving and sustenance. These three must be recognized as a whole in life-giving and sustenance, and there is no life without a sustainable environment (Mongalise & Boateng 6). From the foregoing, humanity and scholarship generally should have a rethink about the environment and the life it sustains. *Come and Spend a Day With Me* presents more devastating images to ecofeminist thinkers than the persona who still celebrates the coming of an unborn child. The point is that certain pollutions like gas flares do not end at the point where the gas is flared. Gas spreads through the air and its circulation knows no bounds. We understand from Epstein and Selber (2002) that more gas is flared in the Niger Delta than anywhere else in the world. The flare, they maintain, affects the general life and livelihood of the inhabitants and apart from the increased risks of reproductive health, children suffer major respiratory damage.

Ojaide also eulogizes the liveliness of the environment in *Songs of Myself* when the voice in a poem entitled *In the Omoja River* recalls that:

In the Omoja River we washed body and tools
 As we crossed from the farm after the day's task
 There too, young, we listened to murmuring water
 Before taking tracks into the forest to pick fruits
 The sun wriggled between leaves whose shadows
 Danced on water; a spectacle of correspondence
 (stanzas 1–3)

There is a beautiful and vivacious artistry of nature recollected in the lines above. Observably, the wriggling of the sun between leaves which is reflected by dancing shadows on murmuring water captures

the healthy interconnections of that environment. Such imagination created by words alone revitalizes memories of the environment that are Indigenous to the people of this region. There is an interaction of life here with some adulation of nature at its best. This is what the persona refers to as “a spectacle of correspondence” (stanza 3, line 2). The word *correspondence* speaks well to my understanding of life interconnections. Such affectionate memory needs to be rekindled among the people for environmental sustainability.

Identity Crisis in Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* and *The Questioner*

The identification of an individual or a group or a nation in postcolonial terms as one notices easily is linked to the "other", which means they recognize themselves as "us" with the existence of the "other". According to Boehmer (19-21) "... self-identity is constituted within the gaze of another". This is the case in Ojaide's poems titled "Social Being" (*The Questioner*) and "Self-defence" (*Songs of Myself*) which emphatically present persona that are at a crossroads on how to identify themselves with the "other". The persona in "Social being" is undecided about whether to go with the rich and be insensitive to the needs of the poor or be jobless like his brothers who are unemployed because of the exploitations of the rich and insensitive elites. This makes him indecisive and, his identity lingers on his indecisiveness, in the process of not having a fixed identity, his self-perception is unfixed as can be deduced from the following excerpts:

I want to be part of the dancing, laughing, or
 Groaning not be singled out as out of order.
 Should I dance alone, I will be the only happy one that
 The world will brand insensitive to the suffering masses,
 And should I laugh a lone on Sunday, the gossip will fly
 Through the week of my derangement among sane folks. ("Social
 being", 32)

Equally, this same confusion is observed in "Self-defence" whereby we find a disabuse conception of a supposedly "lazy man" by the community (the other). This misconceived view of the persona being a "loafer" triggers angry remembrance of a biased people who refuse

to acknowledge his many heroic deeds stated in the following:

They say I am the loafer, the stay-at-home one
 And everybody smacks me with terrible insults!
 When the warrior chief's home caught fire in his absence
 I spotted it and alerted folks to stop the savage blaze;
 When the wealthy farmer's mother took ill and collapsed
 I, the reviled loafer, the stay-at-home one, revived her.
 (“Self-defence”, 91)

Both persona's identities in the two poems are unstable and unfixed, therefore, as Hall propounds Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between several intersecting discourses. (Hall, 10). further down the poems, this study observes that the persona are pitched against their communities as they try to define themselves within the dominant conception of the community about “a good” or “bad person”, hence both persona question their national identities:

The rest will not see me as a social being
 Knowing I want to wipe out generations of sluggers;
 The world needs to rid itself of slackers
 To grow endangered species into a new strong breed. (“Social being”, p.32).

They say I haven't the bile it takes in the liver
 To kill a snake not to talk of catching a snakefish,
 They say I am like rock salt used in preparing dishes
 And would melt and so cannot fish or farm in the rain
 But I am sent on errands, the town crier of every season.

(“Self-defence”, 91)

The chaos of having inherited an exploitative ruling system from former white colonizers affects the traditional institutions that have been brutally hybridised by colonialists' manipulations which creates suspicion, and disregard of the people's view of how they should live their lives, hence indirectly causing personality fragmentations that culminate to an irresolvable identity crisis as can be deduced from the reading of the preceding lines.

Moreover, Ashcroft et al argue that “the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development

or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place". (Ashcroft et al 8). This situation can be said to be the persona dilemma in the poems "I Choose" (*The Questioner*) and "Without these Memories" (*Songs of Myself*). In these two poems, the persona identify with their memories, trauma, and self-perception of themselves to locate who they are. This is why in both poems there is the identification of a place, a tragic happening, the landscape or environment in which the persona grow and love which enables them the will to locate who they are:

...I choose not to sell who gave me a backstab that I survived;
 I cover the sandals of those who made me a celebrity laughingstock. ("I Choose", [The Questioner].116).
 Without these memories charging in and out
 ...What poverty would be afflicting me today!
 Without the retinue stampeding for recognition
 What loneliness would accompany me all year
 To destinations of hope set out without a roadmap
 ("Without these memories",34)

In their emotional connection with the past, the persona trace their identities through carefully guarded memories. As they reminiscence on the barriers that almost mar their identities, they celebrate their steadfastness to overcome being fragmented by the communal celebration of corrupt and unpatriotic elites who try to stifle and oppress citizens of their communities who oppose their ill-gotten wealth as illustrated thus:

I refuse to fire at the buffalo

...Despite puncturing their growth.

So that the profuse sweat of the labourer
 Doesn't stigmatize my fortune. ("I Choose", 116)

What poverty would be afflicting me today!

Without the retinue stampeding for recognition

What loneliness would accompany me all year
 To destinations of hope set out without a roadmap
 ("Without these memories", 34)

By implication, the persona's pain becomes the base and strength of

their identification in such ways that they are not bedevilled by the powerful corrupt elites who exploit and try to oppress the poor in their midst. As they go back to the “place” that ruptures their identities, as Bell Hooks (172) says, they can locate themselves by looking back at their past and then weighing their uprightness with the corrupt lives of the elites in ways that make them uphold fairness, justice, and equity over acquiring the manipulative powers of the colonizers as adopted by corrupt elites in their communities.

Culture in Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* and *The Questioner*

Stuart Hall posits that: “Cultural identity...is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being”. It belongs to the future as much as to the past...Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything historical, they undergo constant transformation.” (Cited in Hooks 5). With Halls' claims as the backdrop for locating the culture of the people of the Niger Delta, this study is of the view that Ojaide's poetry brings to the fore, the problems of having to live with a hybridised culture. The poems “Kingdoms of Immortality” (*The Questioner*) and “Apprehension” (*Songs of Myself*) present personalities that are mystified by the spirituality of African traditions. While the persona in “Apprehension” accepts his tradition and so builds self-confidence by imploring the gods to come to his aid, the persona in “Kingdoms of Immortality” cultivates a personality that is egocentric and hence he becomes like his former colonizers in trying to use his African identity to suppress others, which is illustrated in the following:

We set up palaces, customized kingdoms,

To reign over realities of night and day.

... We achieve feats of giants despite our puny size;

Admirals of a fleet berthed in a backyard creek. (“Kingdoms of immortality”44)

The tortoise taunts the tar doll with insults

The tar doll apprehends the talker with silence

O Aridon, take away the brassy rattle from me

But leave me the indestructible bronze of Benin

(“Apprehension”, 154)

The realisation that there is power in identifying with past kingdoms and gods that are indestructible, stimulates a narcissist's way of life and like Foucault (1978) posits, the identity of the persona in Ojaide's poems cannot be fully developed without instituting the systems of power as allowed by the culture of a people. Autocracy, chaos, oppression, subjugation, and humiliation become tools for effecting a totalitarian identity that was non-existent in a culturally moral community now adulterated by “despotic maniacs” who are a reflection of the former colonizers. These despots concede to a state of confusion and final loss of direction as they also reconcile with their past to find inner peace, here illustrated in the two poems:

I believe in rites, rights of the ruler and not the ruled-

In front of folks, I set up my throne to wave misery;

A place to sit and get my needs without asking for them.

(“Kingdom of immortality”, 45)

I throw my phallus to the hyenas to be a new man

Since wife-beaters justify savagery with body parts

I sire a clan of adorable children without lovemaking

I know the whole world without leaving my room

(“Apprehension”. 154)

From knowing that they are men from reputable kingdoms, they transcend to men of lustful living, accumulating greedy and ill-gotten wealth which makes them lose their African communal identity. Because of the biased European culture that Nigeria inherited from the former British government, men who acquire power want control over the less powerful, and to be personalities of great repute in their communities, Ojaide's persona resolve to master their memories, traumas, pains, and joys such that their identities are discernible.

Again, Bhabha refers to a person who is unhomely, as one of those who cannot easily be accommodated in the familiar divisions of social and cultural life (Bhabha 9). Ojaide equally suggests the “unhomely” man who is juxtaposed between what he feels he is and what the community wants him to be in the poem titled “My Island”. The persona is depressed because he is different as a result of being a “hybridised man”, who is both revolutionary and patriotic:

My island is a world away from others
 But I cannot sleep in the night of my comfort
 ...At daytime my boats fill with fighters and prayers
 That I am sending to distant islands without quays;
 Locked mansions without keys to enjoy affluence.
 I cannot have peace when others are facing riots
 For doing the right things prescribed in the books
 ...“I have nowhere else to go for relief than only yours!”
 I had thought worlds away from the desires of others.
 (“My Island” (The Questioner), 207)

According to Hooks, “One of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience.” (19). Hooks' position can be deduced in the poem, “Let them die for Asernal”. In the poem, this study sees individuals look the other way when tyrannical operations are carried out against a powerless race (specifically, Nigerians). Here, Ojaide brings out the oppression of an entire community that is plagued with corrupt sons of the soil, who after amassing wealth, exploit and oppress the ignorant masses:

...Those who do nothing seeing their property carted away
 Those who watch their mothers, wives, and daughters raped
 Those who pay phantom light bills for blackouts months
 Those whose reps steal their share of the national wealth
 Those who abandon their children in war to save themselves
 (“Let them die for Arsenal” (*Songs of Myself*), 165)

Ojaide retells the tyrannical condemnation of one's culture by the rich, powerful, and influentially corrupt hybridised individuals in the above lines. The proliferation of material wealth over communal harmony causes the identities of the poor in their midst, to be fragmented and this affects the health of the community because depressed individuals do not engage in positive yielding activities to make their societies better; while the rich continue to exploit the poor and torment them with irresponsible largesse, here illustrated:

...and let the strong breed here live on
 Die for Arsenal and rid the land of a contagion

Die for Arsenal and rid the psychos and suicides
Die for Arsenal, die for Chelsea and avert national implosion
(Let them die for Arsenal, (Songs of Myself), 165)

In “Let them die for Asernal” the rich individual sees himself as the “other”, an oppressor whose power is used “not for defending the handicapped against abusers”. Instead, the wealthy in the community “die for Arsenal, whose body won’t be buried in England” (167); and trample on the poor thus desecrating the cultures of the land by not accepting to be promoters of cultural peace/edification, instead their greed to amass wealth at all costs takes their hearts away from being true Africans who once cared for their brothers and ensure that their neighbours’ bodies do not end up as “carcasses for vultures” (167).

Conclusion

The poems of Ojaide from the two collections, draw readers' sensibilities to a people whose identities are fragmented because of an unstable communal culture. In most of the poems studied, this research pinpoints persona who are indecisive. These persona search for themselves via self-examination, their histories, memories, and their trauma to locate identities that are true replicates of independence, honesty, and righteousness. It is to the credit of this study that this paper suggests that the cultures of individuals who want to be upright and patriotic citizens get humiliated by unpatriotic powerful persons who like their former British colonizers; humiliate, suppress, and exploit the masses of their privileges and material wealth.

These “oppressors” therefore exploit citizens without material wealth or power by trying to force them into conforming to exploitative activities against the African way of being one's “brother's keepers”. Poems such as “My Island”, “I Choose”, “Without My Memories”, etc. all narrate the ordeal of living one's life relative to the “other”. This act of being undecided, like Ojaide says in one of the poems, makes men “throw their phallus to hyenas to become new men”. These new men, compromise their identities and culture(s) to promote the culture of suppression, oppression, and humiliation of the white man. Because of the greed of corrupt and

influential persons in the society, the less privileged suffer greatly in building identities and cultures that are rooted in the African principles of brotherly love, hence the result is continued societal friction whereby the poor are constantly humiliated by selfish and greedy rich men of the society.

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