

Situating Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan*: History, the environment, socio-economic and political concerns, and orature

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Abstract

Tanure Ojaide's book of poems, *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), offers poetry readers and those familiar with his opus a critical insight of the dismal socio-political and economic conditions of Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Oil exploration and its devastating effects on the environment and the human family form the bulk of the poet's concerns. The poems range in style and form; however, what makes the collection a publication of substance is the poet's ability to examine contemporary issues with the eyes of a witness and the sincerity of one driven by empathy. This essay focuses on the poet's selection of themes and the historical, cultural, and political contexts of his poetry. More importantly, I argue that Ojaide employs bold rhetoric and an assortment of techniques to assert the importance of his persona as an eyewitness to

historical happenings, especially the destruction of the Niger Delta's ecosystem and environment as a result of oil exploitation and the marginalization of the ethnic minority people in whose land oil is exploited.

Keywords

Exploitation, harmattan, oil, Kaiama, Niger Delta, ecosystem, Egbesu boys, minority, Ken Saro-Wiwa, expatriates.

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In one collection of poetry divided into three sections with a glossary that familiarizes the reader with Nigeria's landscape, politics, Urhobo folklore, and various historical and mythical figures, prolific Nigerian scholar-poet Tanure Ojaide uses bold rhetoric and an assortment of techniques to assert the poet's persona as an eyewitness to historical happenings, especially the destruction of the Niger Delta's ecosystem and environment as a result of oil exploitation and the marginalization of the ethnic minority people in whose land oil is exploited. In the course of this poetic narrative, he expresses sympathy for the underprivileged and exploited in society, whose struggle for equity, fairness, and justice he supports. Aware of the postcolonial situation in his native country, Nigeria, he condemns the rampant corruption that wastes the

enormous resources of the country. Affirming humanity, he condemns in the strongest terms possible the perpetrators of genocide as in the Darfur region of Sudan.

Tanure Ojaide has established himself as one of the most significant poets of African origin writing today. His poetry has relevance not only because of the compelling themes he deals with but also because of his sophisticated appropriation of oral and traditional performance techniques into the written medium. He has a singular style that is at once simple and deep, multi-layered in meaning, and versatile in form. It is some of these features that may be responsible for his many poetry awards, including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Africa Region (1987), the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award (1989), twice the All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Poetry (1989 and 2003), and thrice the Association of Nigerian Authors' Poetry Award (1987, 1997), 2002, and 2005). His literary reputation has risen to such an extent that his poetry is studied widely not only in Nigeria and the rest of Africa but also in the United States, Europe, and the British Commonwealth. It is for this reason that I have chosen to discuss his most recent collection of poems, *The Tale of the Harmattan*, which appears to coalesce and heighten the many poetic virtues associated with his writing for the past thirty years or so.

For the sake of placing Ojaide's work within the appropriate historical framework to which it belongs, it is important that we associate his body of work with that of

African poets that belong to the generation frequently tagged by critics of African poetry as the “third generation,” which Tanure Ojaide himself attempts to identify to readers in his essay “The New African Poetry in English: Content and Form”:

The third generation of African poets...started to write mainly from the mid-1970s and after. These poets include Kofi Anyidoho, Frank Chipasula, Syl Cheney-Coker, Jack Mapanje, Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, and Mongane Wally Serote....The “new” poets embraced and developed in various directions the written poetic tradition that their literary elders brought to global attention. These younger poets range from those currently in their twenties to others in their fifties. These writers studied modern African poetry, unlike the older generation that had no sufficient body of written African poetry to respond to. In the beginning of their art, they borrowed techniques from the older poets, but they later shed these to chart and refine their own individual craft.... Familiar with their literary elders and respectful of their achievements, the “new” poets nonetheless appear to reject the Western imitative aspects of their poetic techniques. So, even though the reader of modern African poetry can observe intertextual ties, especially in technique, with some of the earlier poets, these occur mainly at the beginnings of the new poets’ careers. (142)

From Ojaide's statement above we can conclude that modern African poetry has evolved from “the first generation of poets who wrote during the colonial period and the second generation of modern African poets who

started to write just before and after political independence" (Ojaide 141). Subsequent political and cultural changes in Africa gave rise to the third generation, the class to which Ojaide belongs. It is from our recognition of that group's vision and appropriation of a distinct approach to writing poetry that we shall be able to appreciate better Tanure Ojaide's new poems.

As with his fourteen collections of published poetry, Tanure Ojaide's latest book of poems continues to share with readers the various ways the poet synthesizes and incorporates subjects, themes, and techniques that lyrically capture historical moments, moods, and orature from an artistic perspective. In this collection, Ojaide strikes a balance: his emphasis on the globalization of human crises from the local makes his poetry universally relevant. The fact that what happens in the troubled oil-rich but impoverished Niger Delta region of Nigeria affects the oil price worldwide shows the degree of the connectedness of the local and the global, what is now described as "glocal".

But there is more to Ojaide's stance as a poet that makes his writing both pivotal and historical. He belongs to the Urhobo ethnic group in the Niger Delta, which makes his poetry an eyewitness account for the world. I suppose this was the point the Canadian poet and short story writer John Lent makes in his introduction to an essay on Ojaide's poetry, "'From This Hurt to the Unquestioning World': Seven Poems from Delta Blues":

In fact, it would be tempting for anyone removed from the political complexity and violence of the delta in Nigeria to suspect the rhetoric in some of these poems or feel uneasy about the way some of them flirt with political absolutes. But I do not live in the delta of Nigeria, and I have not been exiled from my country like Ojaide. And when I think of my distance from his landscape and the brutal events taking place in it, I feel humbled by Ojaide's voice and eye. (215)

Lent's statement directly introduces us to his examination of Ojaide as a poet and human being. His perception of the poet as a recorder of happenings in his world and an eyewitness for his people is clearly illustrated in a language that relates to the totality of Ojaide's vision and concerns addressed in *The Tale of the Harmattan*.

Ojaide's sensibility appears in the various levels of emotions and ideas expressed in the poetry in his latest book of poems. The Niger Delta's fauna and flora give identity to its indigenous people, and Ojaide does a good job in capturing the defoliated physical landscape and waterways for his readers. The once lush green rainforest and mangroves of the coastal region are no more. The poet takes it as his responsibility to not just address but complain and raise alarm at the destruction of the environment taking place, a local phenomenon that has connection with the worldwide green gas effect.

Take, for example, the poem "The goat song," where Ojaide laments the state of the environment in couplets:

*They incinerate our dead heroes with flares;
no hardwood for caskets to accord them honour.*

*Ozidi will not forgive the humiliation.
Ogidigbo will not forgive the insult.*

*The blackened stream is ancestral blood
tapped away by giant pipes into ships*

*to rejuvenate foreign cities, invigorate markets;
distant places lit with wonders; here, a blackout.*

*Agitated, Mowoe flaunts his right forefinger.
In self-defence Saro-Wiwa exhorts foot soldiers.*

*The wind laments, its fans are burning out;
the trees have been shaved of their coiffures.*

*The snake is sliding closer to the heart
and its venom intensifies with every strike.*

*The big family is dying out—irokos fall; game
leave in droves, and humans flee to hunger. (10)*

“The goat song”, Ojaide explains in the glossary, “represents a song of anguish and complaint.” He

appropriates the communal town-crier's voice to detail the negative happenings in his society. Indeed the poetic purpose is true when we examine the sarcasm he weaves into each couplet to reflect and philosophize the reality of living in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. He employs poetic metaphors to expose marginalization, neglect, exploitation, and the brutal reality of the region. The first couplet shares the persona's lament over the neglect shown toward the land burned as a result of oil exploration and the ignorance displayed by the perpetrators of the burning, obviously multinational oil companies and the government, for the legendary heroes from Ojaide's folklore, Ozidi and Ogidigbo, are buried in the same land. The idea behind this referencing is significant for the African poet because it lends support to Kofi Awoonor's statement in his essay "Contemporary Samples of English-Speaking African Poetry" that "Heroism, desired even into death, is the essential element of ancestorhood" (194). Ojaide is from the Niger Delta, and both legendary heroes referenced hail from the area. These heroes, he feels, deserve respect where they rest.

The third couplet centers on the exploitation of oil exported to foreign lands for their development while the Niger Delta wastes in neglect and blackout. "The blackened stream" (oil) is metaphorically "ancestral blood" since it is taken from the earth in the impoverished Niger Delta. The fifth couplet references modern-day heroes from the Niger Delta who are not pleased with the

multinational oil companies. Mowoe is a "great personality of the 1940s who brought unity to the Urhobo group", while Saro-Wiwa is the "Ogoni minority and environmental activist framed for murder and hanged by the Sani Abacha regime on November 10, 1995" (Ojaide: 2007, 62-63).

Many couplets of "The goat song" illustrate the conscious experimentation with orature and deal with social concerns. "The snake sliding closer to the heart" is the gradual destruction of the Niger Delta that seems to be beyond control. The references to the trees shaved, the felled iroko trees, and the wind that laments its burning fans reveal Ojaide's regrets over the environmental hazards and the loss of the natural habitat of the Niger Delta as a result of oil exploitation.

It is important to note that the concerns raised by Tanure Ojaide in "The goat song" are not racial or cultural like the ones one would find in the poems of Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Augustino Neto, Gabriel Okara, Lenrie Peters, and other poets of the 1960s generation of African poetry. The earlier generation of poets was interested in promoting African culture and expressing cultural conflicts. However, Ojaide writes on the immediate socio-economic and political happenings that touch the lives of his people. Such a shift in thematic concerns and subject matter is what distinguishes Ojaide's poetry from the earlier generation and establishes him as an important voice in post-colonial African poetry.

Technically, the poems in *The Tale of the Harmattan* share with readers Ojaide's passion for exploring traditional African folklore. His poetry, dating back to his first collection, *Children of Iroko & Other Poems* (1973), has always been structured around the poet's devotion to names, folklore, and places that define his origin in the Niger Delta. In this collection, Ojaide uses quatrains to push the same ideology while remaining consistent with the same themes and subject matters that his readers are already familiar with. Take, for example, the poem "Quatrain suite", a poem in seventeen stanzas that shares Ojaide's lament for the polluted waters of the Niger Delta. In this poem Ojaide reflects on the importance of Mami Wata, that mythical water mermaid who resides underwater and holds an important place in Niger Delta folklore:

*To have loved Mami Wata in her underwater palace
of coral:*

*to have had trysts with the moon in her days of full
glory,*

*to have tasted one dish and never wished for
another,*

*and to have lived here when it was a different
country! (17)*

The underlying message in this stanza of the poem is that once the rivers are polluted the Mami Wata will no longer be there. The stanza also shares the persona's passionate reflection on the subject, for with each repeated use of "to

have" the reader feels the emotion in the utterance and language.

From the same poem we are introduced to the various ways Ojaide uses personification to predicate importance to the land just as much as one would to humans holding honorary positions. Take, for example, the fifth stanza where again we feel a greater sense of the persona's lament:

The map of my homeland has changed.

The cartographers blot out forests and rivers.

Oil wells and flares dot the new landscape—

now nobody recognizes the beauty queen's face.

It is that asserting of private concerns as public concerns in Ojaide's poetry that has been most significant in his writing, a fact supported by the British literary critic Stewart Brown's avowal that "For a poet like the much praised Tanure Ojaide, confronting the desolation of Nigeria's civil society by successive corrupt governments is a sacred duty, and words, given appropriate poetic shape by the very pressure of the circumstances, are the only weapon available to him." The corruption in the corridors of power becomes a prominent theme in Ojaide's poem when we question why "cartographers blot out forests and rivers", "oil wells and flares dot the new landscape" and "nobody recognizes the beauty queen's face." Of course, nobody will recognize the beauty queen's face when the order of the day is petrodollar and oil exploitation. The call for the recognition of the importance

of ecosystems and environment by environmentalists worldwide remains a sermon unheard where capitalist intentions overrule ethical standards.

Other quatrains in "Quatrain suite" remind us of Ojaide's assuming of the poet's responsibility as a moral and ethical voice for his people while also invoking Stewart Brown's statement that "the notion of the poet as duty-bound to confront the political issues of the day harks back to the idea of the poet in the oral tradition as the literal spokesman for the common people in the courts of the powerful." Take, for example, the quatrain that shares the poet's distaste for actions of the privileged class:

*The rich among us used to boast of the many
barrels*

of palm oil they produced in the season of industry.

*Then came spills and flares that burnt out palm
trees.*

*Today the government and Shell toast their oil
fortune. (19)*

Here poetry seems to be a forum for the poet to express his individual response to issues of national crisis. Ojaide directs his attacks at the rich, the government, and Shell without compromise. His reasons for such attacks are well-stated, for the privileged continue in their fortune-making operations while the masses suffer in poverty and environmental hazards. The position taken here is humanistic because it invokes a global concern for human rights. We also sense the rage in the tone of the persona,

but it is a rage that can only be understood in light of the reader bearing the cross of the victims or dispossessed, which we find in quatrain # 15:

*The birds and beetles lost their refuge, as people
of the creeks lost their sun, moon, and stars to
fumes.
Why are survivors of the globalization assault only
the insignia of commanders-in-chief, vultures and
cobras?*

There are, of course, many ways of interpreting poetry. But poetry, however difficult, has endless possibilities for meaning when a poet's body of work becomes familiar to his/her readership. The quatrain above revisits the threat of pollution and deforestation to our environment. And what else could be said when the supposed rulers who ought to know better turn their faces and allow such destructive practices to continue? And, without a doubt, the irony of this quatrain will continue as long as "survivors of the globalization assault" continue to be wear the badge of authority of "commanders-in-chief, vultures and cobras." The references to vultures and cobras are direct attacks at those in the corridors of power or tyrants whose closed ears to the concerns addressed in this quatrain reveal their greed. The same can be said about the commanders-in-chief, the presidents or kings/queens, who also neglect and exploit their subjects and environment/ecosystem.

Yet, the more one reads into *The Tale of the Harmattan*, the more one becomes aware of the political nature of the poems. Ojaide's concerns in these poems owe much of their relation to his sensibilities and affinities toward his homeland. He is not sacrificing his artful inclinations or calling for political sloganeering or writing poems with a Marxist agenda as one unaware of the brilliance of his imagistic complexity might admit. Take, for example, the concern raised by Stephanie Newell, the British Reader in English Literature at the University of Sussex:

In creative writing, too, an overtly didactic Marxist agenda can cause non-Marxist critics to recoil, particularly when high doses of 'protest politics' are not diluted by 'literary' language and a sensitivity to form. For example, the work of the Nigerian socialist poet, Tanure Ojaide, causes Stewart Brown to remark that 'his poems are blunt "messages from the front", sacrificing imagistic complexity or formal musicality for a rhetorical outrage that overwhelms the "poetry"—insofar as we equate poetry with subtlety, ambiguity and linguistic cunning'. (164)

That a poet chooses to be confrontational in his subject matter and direct in his address do not in anyway mean that he will be "sacrificing imagistic complexity or formal musicality for a rhetorical outrage," as Brown suggests. Instead Ojaide's poetry utilizes, with measured language, imagery and urgency of thought to capture moods and historical actions that advance his society's reflection of the human condition—dislike of inequality, exploitation, and other negative forces.

Take, for example, the poem "For the Egbesu Boys," a poem dedicated to the armed and rebelling youths of the Niger Delta, who, for love of their assaulted environment and neglect by the government, have taken up arms to defend their homeland from further destruction by multinational oil companies and government agencies. In this poem, the poet's persona commends the efforts of the Egbesu boys while also showing support for their cause:

For the same reason I sang praise of the Ogoni youths,

I praise you Egbesu Boys in song—you cannot be

shackled from enjoying your own land's blessings;

you do the honourable duty of brave sons -fight on.

(41)

Ojaide's solidarity with the oppressed and dispossessed is clearly established in the lines cited above. Ojaide, a Niger Delta minority and indigene, is as much in support morally with the fight of the Egbesu boys as with his awareness of their reasons for fighting. Yet there is a fine line here we all must understand. While supporting the spirit of resistance, Ojaide is not advocating violence; rather he is merely supporting the spirit of revolt against oppressive systems shown by the Egbesu boys, which reminds him of the spirit of revolt shown by the Ogoni youths after their leader, the environmental and minority rights activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was hanged by the Nigerian dictatorial military

junta of Sani Abacha. The apparent thread here is the solidarity that exists between the poet and the activists, something that echoes South African fiction writer Nadine Gordimer's reminder in her essay, "A Writer's Freedom," where she says, "The fact is that even on the side of the angels, a writer has to reserve the right to tell the truth as he sees it, in his own words, without being accused of letting the side down" (qtd in Habila).

The question we must revisit then is, where do we draw the line between "sacrificing imagistic complexity or formal musicality for a rhetorical outrage" as Brown suggests about Ojaide's earlier poetry? Or is a writer's decision to tell the truth as Gordimer has stated "rhetorical outrage"? The reasonable thing to do, I would suppose, is to let the work speak for itself while also making the effort to understand the writer's position. The poet does not involve himself in the struggle of the Egbesu boys without knowing fully the source of their fight. Like the Egbesu boys, he wakes up daily to witness the nightmarish world of living in a Niger Delta assaulted daily by environmental pollution caused by oil exploitation and neglect by a government that has refused to see any reason in listening to the cries of the Egbesu boys and other youth groups that protest the destruction of their environment and ecosystem.

Much as we attempt to view the activities of the Egbesu boys as local events, they do have global implications. And that is what gives even worldwide relevance to Ojaide's

poetry. He is up-to-date with the current events that shape the times we live in. When the *New York Times* covers the kidnap of foreign oil expatriates by Niger Delta environmental and resource control fighters and tags their activities robbery after assembling reports from local news houses funded by the Nigerian government, there is little room for the world to know the true stories of what actually led to the kidnapping. But that is not to say that Ojaide, again, is advocating kidnapping or supporting the kidnappers. He is simply shedding light on activities that shape events in his place of birth and Niger Delta homeland. Take, for example, another series of couplets from the poem dedicated to the Egbesu boys:

*Egbesu Boys, dismiss with your blood the charge
of robbery by the coalition of global powers.*

*You cannot live on your rivers, primeval providers;
they kill the fish population with a sludge of poisons.*

*You cannot even drink water from anywhere—
they pissed down barrels of arsenic into it.*

*They flare gas to raise demands for the commodity
and in so doing mangle every farmer's harvest;*

they spray the airspace with methanol and insidious chemicals—you cannot breathe clean air any more

with the particulate matter of fumes breeding an asthmatic and cancer-prone generation. (41)

The rage expressed in the lines cited here are functional to the poet for many reasons. The poem helps the reader to critically examine why the actions of groups such as the Egbesu boys have global implications. It also helps the reader to examine the political role of poetry. Furthermore, the poem reminds the reader that poetry, despite its sheer economy of words, can have real life implications when read. Obviously the group addressed by Ojaide in this poem represents the many voices singing for liberation in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Besides, "The Niger Delta area signifies minority status and oil exploration. As a result of the people's exploitation and marginalization, there is a history of struggle for a fair share of resources and for survival in the federation of Nigeria" (Ojaide 65).

Much as in the case of Ojaide's previous poetry collections, the poems in this book address the history of struggles in modern-day Nigeria and current events in Nigeria's Niger Delta region and how those events reflect local issues with global implications. Take, for example, the poem "For my grandchild," a serious reflection on the Niger Delta situation and what the future holds for the coming generation of indigenes:

*My children have had no scholarships;
they can't fish or tap rubber as I once did,*

*the river transformed into a snake of a tomb
and the forest fraught with flares and fumes.*

*With crude oil gushing into slave ships
refurbished as free-market super-tankers,*

*the government assures people of development
with proceeds from export and spot-market deals.*

*No jobs for the graduates in the oil sector
even as wells litter the family's farmlands.*

*In the daily dearth of prospects staring at all,
mobile policemen brandish guns in the sun*

*and, from a safe distance above the ground,
hired retired marines keep the pipelines safe.*

*Villages of imploring eyes marching, hands up-
raised with green-leafed branches, mowed down.*

*CNN & BBC embedded with Chevron and Shell
report that local women, stripping before cameras*

to save their dying children and men, are primitive.

*In their secure wings they know not Ogoni's agonies.
(22)*

The poem is direct and captures the insolence of the government and the misinformation of the international community on the reality of the Niger Delta predicament. Ojaide laments the failed promises by the government and the government's neglect of the Niger Delta's flora and fauna that suffer from residues of oil exploitation. Some of the issues

Ojaide covers in this poem have been reported in international media coverage of Nigeria's oil saga. Take, for example, Ojaide referencing of the local women stripping at the headquarters of Chevron and Shell, two major international oil companies in Nigeria, which has been covered in the online article, "Nigerian Women End 'Stand-Off' With Oil Company", which reports that "More than 2,000 women protesters in the oil-rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria ended their stand-off with Chevron on Thursday following negotiations between the multi-national oil company and community leaders." The very fact that Ojaide incorporates these real life events into his poetry reflects the relevance of his art and his awareness of the responsibility of the writer to protect human life and the world. The act of writing is freedom, and within

that freedom comes obligations that are sacred and very much reflective of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's statement that "If the role of the intellectual is to use words in defense of human life, in our times this responsibility should translate into raising a hue and cry against the 'destroyers' of the world" (36).

Another poem in this collection that reveals the destruction of the landscape and natural habitat in much the same way as "For my grandchild" is the poem "At the Kaiama

Bridge," which shares with us Ojaide's insight at using a language that is both direct and terse to question the activities of authoritarian marketing and capitalist-driven oil-trading companies in the Niger Delta:

*Do I want to shed blood defending the wealth
that the gods themselves have given up
because they know in their serene silence
the barbaric charge of godless ones after them?*

*Is revolution dead and must the Egbesu Boys
surrender rights of ownership and humanity
to the brigand lord and his fierce livery
of insatiable appetites raising a flaming flag?*

At the wobbling Kaiama Bridge that holds the Delta

together, I see a procession of oil-soaked water spirits

wailing their way out. No boats of fishermen plying

the waterways; no regatta and no swimmers in sight. (34)

The pathetic nature and seriousness of the situation addressed here gives Ojaide's reader reasons to value the poet's role as a public voice for the oppressed and dispossessed. The first two quatrains cited show through questions Ojaide's quest for urgent answers to the Niger Delta crisis and his awareness of the "brigand lord" and his "fierce livery of insatiable appetites." The themes covered are both dynamic and reflective of events in present-day Nigeria. Yet the pleasure of reading Ojaide's poems comes through as with any good poet's work. Through the poems in this section one can easily identify with the speaker's thirst for human freedom, his passion for his subject matter, his reflection on the injustices carried out against the Niger Delta people, their land, and their natural resources. In short, the tragedy experienced in the destruction of wildlife and natural habitat are clearly examined with the skillful touch of a seasoned craftsman in this poem. This clearly gives the content and message the universal appeal and attention reminiscent of any ethnic group or culture whose natural habitat is threatened by oil pollution and incompetence in the corridors of power.

Besides, in these quatrains we learn a bit about the function of literature in society, for Ojaide is once again

reminding us of his contention in his book of essays, *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*:

Literature has to draw attention to [the] increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights. In the 1960s and 1970s the focus was on political corruption, which was destroying the very fabric of good governance. In the 1980s and now socio-economic concerns have become dominant. Housing, food, health and basic needs which were taken for granted in the 1960s and early 1970s have become the focus of attention. It is understandable why African literature is utilitarian.
(42)

The concerns Ojaide raises here are typically of his vision as a writer. Leafing through *The Tale of the Harmattan*, one can easily find poems that weave ideas and conflicts to advance Ojaide's dissatisfaction with the Nigerian government's neglect of the economically exploited and the devastating destruction of the environment by modern industry and oil business. For example, in "Swimming in a waterhole", the persona expresses his anguish through lamentation:

*We grew up to love rivers and lakes, open refuge
that saved children from the hard labour at home—
every parent knew where first to look for a missing
child
before ever alerting the town-crier to beat the drum.*

Many of us did not concentrate at school in anticipation

of going straight to swim until dusk when eyes turned red.

Rivers and lakes must have cried themselves into silence—

we spent nothing of our millions of earnings to save them.

For decades water hyacinths overran the pristine waterscape

in convoys of weed and started stifling the beautiful host.

With the oil companies only looking after profit margins,

oil slicks easily found their way to bury the waters alive.

Parents still make demands of children as never before;

the ageless sun remains master archer in the dry season

and young ones ever restless seek new bathing spots to relieve themselves of the sun's scorching gaze.

Burrow pits of road builders, deluged into perennial waterholes, provide respite from hard labour at home

but there is no fish, no water spirits borne by currents;

no Mami Wata and others to share the salt of life.

In these holes abandoned caterpillars and other monsters

drag down the swimmer without recourse to a treat.

We are fortunate we still swim in groups in the open.

After gas flares, oil slicks, and hyacinths converge

to turn rain into acid and all the methane seeps in

to raise new syndromes that destroy the body,

where next to seek refuge from step-mothers

when the sun flares up in its sadistic fit? (36)

In this poem, we are reminded of how the failure of dreams continues to haunt the African poet after Africa's independence from colonial powers. More so, there is a sense of urgency in each couplet cited. Ojaide deems it appropriate to use childhood experiences in the coastal area of Nigeria to showcase how relevant water and its

resources were to a community until oil exploitation began. The critic Ogaga Okuyage, in his essay "Resistance to Tyranny: The Representation of Government in Recent African Poetry" sheds some light on issues that help us to understand "Swimming in a waterhole":

The present state of African poetry is informed by the dire economic predicament of most African countries, which situates the teeming masses of Africans around the abject corners of society. Hence, Ojaide remarks that it has become 'fashionable among poets from the mid-1970s more than before to align with the economically exploited, underprivileged masses of the society.

Okuyage's statement reinforces the idea of the poet's dissatisfaction with the ruling class and the deceptive method of governing.

Tanure Ojaide's vision as a poet stretches beyond the borders of Nigeria. He has written poems that appear in content and form as forceful indictments of modern African regimes and the senseless wave of genocide in different parts of the continent as in "To the Janjaweed." As with much of his serious and memorable poems, this poem immediately places Ojaide within the category of poets whose work invokes that provocative line by Emily Dickinson when she says, "A word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die" (676). From the very first couplet of this poem to the last, there is a sense of urgency at play. Ojaide is holding nothing back from his target. Instead he is compelled to share in the relevance of

the experience invoked. This poem, for all its historical ramifications, brings to light critical ideas and questions a present-day African dilemma: the genocide in Sudan's Darfur region. The poet employs repetitive curses at the perpetrators in his lamentation of the plight of the victims:

*May the fire you spread gleefully this way
scorch you and your family at the other end*

*may your patrons in government corridors
become dead vultures to the entire world*

*may the horses you ride to sack villages
throw you into vainglorious days*

*may the identity you hide now in scarves
be stripped by the Maker when you need cover*

*may those you chase out of life in these raids
turn round to pursue you out of the next life*

*may your sway over darkness strangle you
and day reduce you to the lowest vermin*

may you escape justice of Khartoum's courts

and be condemned forever in a higher trial

*may those you kill to seize their property
deny you the ultimate refuge of peace*

*may djinns you invoke in your despoliation
testify against you in the final judgment*

*may you be victim of your blood thirst
and wander without relief from paradise*

*may the fire seeds you sow in Darfur
consume you and your damned bands...(58)*

The tragedy of the human condition that has resulted in the massacre of black people, rape of women, and destruction of entire villages by the Arab militia supported by the Sudanese government compelled Ojaide to write these aggressive couplets in bold rhetoric unparalleled elsewhere in this collection. Writing in a tradition of abuse poetry, Ojaide chides and derides the notorious killing gang responsible for many of the deaths in Sudan's Darfur region. Each couplet in this poem is rich with memorable images. In this poem Ojaide employs repetitive words for effectiveness and the advancement of the intensity of the message. The repeated use of "may" reinforces the persona's charges and attacks directed at the oppressor. There is obviously a political side to the

poet's stance in this poem, which is supported by an anonymous reporter for *PBS* covering the Darfur crisis who writes:

On February 27, 2003, bandits mounted on horses stormed into the town of Tawilla in Sudan's north Darfur region and executed organized attack on its residents. The antagonists killed at least 67 people, abducted 16 schoolgirls and raped 93 others, shooting their families. According to accounts, including those reported by the United Nations, the attackers branded the hands of the raped to remind them of the incident and ostracize them from society.

It is in a move to combat such inhumane acts carried out by the Janjaweed and their like that Ojaide conjures up his emotive senses to share his concerns for the victims while also reminding the oppressor of his date with fate. Ojaide's use of creative imagination to fight the misuse of power and challenge the politics of ethnic cleansing and dehumanization brings to mind Ngugi wa Thiong'o's statement that "the challenge of the intellectual is to make words breathe distinctly. Works of imagination and critical theories can only weaken themselves by pulling back from the challenge" (39). As we can see, Ojaide's words do not pull back from the challenge but reinforce the need for the challenge.

The challenge posed by Ojaide's poem far outweighs the red flags it presents to the Janjaweed. Ojaide seems to be reminding us all of the chains of operation that aid the gross neglect for human life and disrespect for

womanhood/motherhood shown by the Janjaweed and why the Janjaweed and their cohorts will not go unpunished. This role of poets as the moral conscience for their immediate societies is a pivotal aspect of Ojaide's art that is also supported by his assertion that the African poets of his generation "want to communicate an urgent message and their poems are crafted to serve that goal" (143). Communicating experience through stylistic appropriations that not only serve the goal of the poet but also show the poet's ambition in exploring his oral tradition appears to be a major trend that Ojaide enjoys in *The Tale of the Harmattan*.

As the book draws to a close, we begin to notice the shift from the public voice to a private voice. This is copiously shown in Ojaide's employment of folkloric material in "Remembering", where his heightened emotional intensity and chants sustain the "memorableness" of the poem:

*The day the farmer lost all his harvest to locusts
the day the herdsman lost all his cows to rinderpest*

the day the fisherman lost his boat and nets to a storm

the day there was a total eclipse of the sun

*the day fire left dry leaves to burn out green ones
the day water failed to quench the burning thirst*

*the day the wind refused to blow away smothering
fumes*

*the day the earth opened a bottomless pit to
another world*

the day the muse thrashed the minstrel

the day the minstrel was struck dumb

the day the goat refused to eat yam leaves

the day the parrot refused to eat corn

the day the drums refused to beat for the dancer

the day the iroko was struck down by lightning

the day erased from the memory of celebrations

the day gone down without a record of its hours

the day all the gates closed to the fugitive

the day the crossroads refused its sacrifice

the day all the alarms refused to go off

the day the clear-eyed guide lost his vision

the day the boneless beast opened its mouth

to swallow an entire man like sautéed crayfish

*that was the day of the summer solstice when in
Jerusalem my best friend died in Sapele. (58)*

Here, the poet rhetorically reflects on his state of mind the day news of the death of his best friend reached him. Speaking personally, Ojaide uses a multitude of riddles uttered in what resembles a cantor's voice to recollect his reaction to the sad news. He draws heavily on a store of images that creatively attempt to explain his state of mind and reaction upon learning that his best friend has passed on. The idea behind this style is to give the reader a sense of the poet's closeness to the deceased and to offer a value to the friendship that existed between the dead and the living. Furthermore, this poem shows Ojaide's indebtedness in style and language to the genius of traditional oral poetry. The images are striking, and the refrain "the day" helps to sustain the reader's interest while also giving each couplet a pleasing lyrical/sing-song appeal. In short, this poem is a chant that fulfills what the poet set out to accomplish. Written for a dead friend, this poem also illustrates how grounded Ojaide is in African oral tradition and supports his claim in his book of essays, *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa* that "there is a symbiotic relationship between oral and the written in modern...African poetry in which the aim, vision, and practice have fused to produce a poetry that is distinctly oral though written" (84).

In short, "Remembering" is a poem that presents a personal voice concerned with the memory of the dead.

Ojaide not only celebrates his dead friend in this poem but also employs a tone that uses elegy to reflect on the importance of the departed and mourned. The elegiac feeling that is very strong throughout the poem is indicative of the poet's awareness of the importance of song in the oral tradition, a point supported by Kofi Awoonor's statement in his book *Guardians of the Sacred Word* that "because poetry is part of the tradition of song, which has no overblown musical importance, its choral nature is brought out in the repetition of lines or of whole segments. This is both for emphasis and for creating the emotional poetic lead into other sections of the same poem..." (24).

Another poem in Ojaide's book that bears resemblance to "Remembering" is "Without the trees." Obviously a lament that again employs the refrain for effectiveness, this poem showcases Ojaide's strong roots in the oral tradition noticeable in the chants and consistent return to naming things in nature. This poem, written in couplet form, shares the persona's lament at the destruction of the natural habitat and strongly advocates for the protection of the ecosystem. The repeated refrains naming nature elements such as trees, evergreens, creeks, currents, sun, shrubs, forest, farms are full of biting ironies. The pivotal aspect of the poem lies in its revelatory features, and we are once again reminded of Ojaide's "rootedness" in the oral tradition as he sings:

*Without the trees
the wind no longer gestures playfully to me*

*without the evergreens
nobody speaks the lingua franca to me*

*without the creeks
the rains no longer sate my voracious appetite*

*without the currents
the flying fish no longer makes sorties into my soup
pot*

*without the sun (now fumigated)
the sunbird no longer plays patiently with me*

*without the shrubs (already devoured by fire)
the dew no longer delivers to me the message at
dawn*

*without the forest (now poached to death)
the choral ensemble of hyrax, woodpecker & co. no
longer
performs for me*

without the farms

the butterflies no longer indulge me with a colourful pageant

without the stars (all smothered)

*I nightly lose my way to the congress with ancestors.
(38)*

Here, as is synonymous with Ojaide's corpus, we can see how important musicality functions in his poetry as he revisits the Niger Delta area and laments about this once pristine environment. The repetition, much like in the previous poem cited, establishes the seriousness and emphasis on the message intended by the poet. The couplets give the impression of the Niger Delta that is despoiled and desecrated because of oil exploitation, gas flares, pollution, and so on. Perhaps the drastic change in the natural cycle and the impact such a change has on global warming gives us some serious considerations to ponder over as we relate the creative text to history. The range of moods in this poem also offers us unimpeded access to the speaker's concerns and leaves us with good reasons to believe that ancestry can be celebrated through nature. For instance, the poet says: "without the stars / I nightly lose my way to the congress with ancestors." The cosmic reference at this juncture is a reminder of the value of the poet's communication with the muse as he performs sacred acts of worship with nature. If he needs the stars to reach out to or receive gifts in the form of communal exchanges with the

ancestors, then it is essential for the reader to understand why this dialogue is crucial in the first place, and also the role such a dialogue plays in the creative process for a poet. And when the stars are "all smothered," according to the poet, it gives us another reason to reconsider the danger and destruction brought upon the natural environment by gas flares and pollution from oil exploitation.

Ojaide returns with the same subject matter of the destruction of nature in "Transplants." The only difference in this poem, however, seems to occur in his shift from eulogizing nature and things to grappling with treasured nostalgic moments of childhood. Location doesn't seem to matter to the poet, for he singles out the clean natural waters in Hawthornden, Scotland, and Steepletop, New York, despite years of industrial activities, which make him lament the waters of his homeland. The occasional use of the first person "I" leads us carefully through each couplet, and at the end we are faced with issues that cross international borders and are of human concern:

I see transplants of my youth's landscape

first at Hawthornden and now at Steepletop:

the pristine streams, the multiethnic population

of plants, costumed birds, and graceful game.

*Surely no bears, coyotes, or foxes there
but deer, antelope, and porcupine dazzle.*

*Birch, eucalyptus, maple, and pine are
older than me—their barks recount centuries of
seasons.*

*Iroko and mahogany are hardly seen; the forest fell
foul to fires of oil blowouts and poaching raids.*

*These streams still flow as they did centuries ago;
the creeks I fished in without care now clogged.*

*This orange dusk on a forest trail with colleagues
brought home Godwin, Boyi, and Obatavwe—*

*we no longer have a place to meet, chased from
home into Warri and Port Harcourt to seek jobs.*

*At early dawn I will break dew on a trail; mere
exercise—
not with Grandma Amreghe to the farm, long
planted.*

*In a half-century one world disappeared; another
persists.*

Only outside do I now see the landscape of my childhood. (39)

Other than the attention drawn to song, this poem illustrates Ojaide's simplicity of thought and symbolic significance attached to memory and relationships. His childhood friendship with Godwin, Boyi, and Obatawwe are crucial to our understanding of this poem. The chase from the countryside as a result of the lack of job prospects led them to the cities, Warri and Port Harcourt, in search of jobs. This happened despite the oil industry in their hometown in the countryside. The reference to Grandma Amreghe is just a mild reminder of missed company, even though from the poet's body of work one can easily discern the special bond he shared with his grandmother who raised him. The rest of the poem revisits the neglect and destruction of nature and the ecosystem. The iroko and mahogany, two gigantic trees associated with the African rainforest are hardly seen because the forest "fell foul to fires of oil blowouts." The creeks the poet fished in as a young man are now clogged with oil from broken pipes. To sum it up, nostalgia, eulogizing of nature and things, and the significance attached to memory and relationships, irrespective of where one is writing from, form the bedrock of Ojaide's concern in this poem.

The idea of post-colonialism as a modern-day problem linked to corruption in the corridors of power in developing countries is a major theme Ojaide explores in the poem "King of fools." In this poem the destructive forces of power, greed, hubris, and lack of vision all work

together to proliferate the wave of corruption ruining
whatever chance for progress there might be as the
persona laments:

*King of fools, they hail the lone one;
they wear him a cellophane robe
and everybody claps at his distinction.*

*He follows the queue orderly,
gets overtaken by everybody else
and, left behind, laughs at himself.*

*He bows not to extortion at roadblocks
set up by barbarous police who butt him
to bleed profusely for being law-abiding.*

*He allows others to have their share
and to leave his, only for his portion
to be wiped out before his patient turn.*

*He stands upright in the crooked lane—
they keep a safe distance from him
they believe is deviant and depraved.*

*He tells the only truth in the republic,
faces jeers and taunts across the land;*

the jury of liars gives him a life sentence.

In the nation jinxed with insolvency,

he is the sacrifice and its carrier.

King of fools, they hail the lone one. (55)

This poem addresses corruption in a post-colonial context. Ojaide's "King of fools," to a large extent, examines the war against corruption as a post-colonial dilemma. Many critics of Ojaide's poetry, irrespective of country or race, have supported his use of poetry to criticize corruption in a post-colonial state. For example, the Indian Darshan Singh Maini states in his essay, "Corruption India Inc: Glittering march of globalisation":

The oriental and colonial countries, in particular, are tragically vulnerable in this regard. When the white imperialists are gone, their native avatars, in more obscene forms, continue to raise levels of corruption. Let me, in the end, add an insightful quotation from a Nigerian poet, Tanure Ojaide, who represents the spirit of anguish and awakening in a continent that's unable, by and large, to shed its "darkness":

Pity the fate of flash millionaires!

If they are not hurled into jail, they live

In the prison-houses of their crimes and wives,

And when they die, of course, only their kind

Shower praises on vultures!

In conclusion, *The Tale of the Harmattan* moves from personal and local concerns to public, national, global, and human issues to show that Ojaide is grounded in historical memory. The language, though highly sophisticated, is simple and reminiscent of the poet's oeuvre. With this book Ojaide certainly advances his place and position as a major voice in the third generation of modern African poets addressing postcolonial concerns through poems indebted to the African oral tradition, themes that challenge the abuse of power in government, and the endangerment of the ecosystem and environment as a result of oil exploitation in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. The collection appears to affirm the poet's belief that literature matters in society, and here it not only draws attention to the negative forces affecting the author's homeland but also indirectly pleads for virtues that will save the environment, society, and humanity.

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