



Towards Environmental Justice: An Ecopoetical Reading Of Ikiriko and Otto's Poetry

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Abstract

Ecology is a study that transcends disciplinary boundaries. It has roots in the sciences but enjoys a number of representations in the humanities, specifically through literature. Several African writers have in their imaginative works, portrayed the devastating condition of the environment in a 21st century technological-driven world and also proposed solutions to this malady. In fact, environmental degradation has become a global issue, hence, the pressing need for a lasting panacea. Attempts at literary ecocriticism in Nigerian literature have largely focused on prose fictional works and the poetry collections of older and second generation poets like Tanure Ojaide. Consequently, little research has been carried out on the representation of environmental degradation in the poetry of more contemporary poets like Ibiwari Ikiriko and Albert Otto. This paper therefore, is a critical, close reading of Ikiriko and Otto's poetry engagement with environmental degradation. The paper adopts the notion of ecopoetry from the ecocritical theory, which accounts for poetry foregrounding questions of ethics in relation to the environment. It acts as a reminder to humans of their responsibility towards the earth and challenges the existing status-quo that has the environment and the common people at the mercy of the ruling class. In this paper, Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* and Otto's *Letter from the Earth* are subjected to literary and critical analysis to examine their preoccupation with the destructive onslaught on nature, and the traumatic experiences of the marginalised. Amidst the environmental depredation, the poets express hope and revolutionary fervour towards the rejuvenation of their society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecology, though it has roots in the sciences, has transcended boundaries and become a global phenomenon and discourse. Through history, third world countries have portrayed a commitment to literature, as they also employ it to capture prevalent conditions of their ecosystem. Besides, romantic poets like William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, among others have also displayed an attachment to nature in their poetry. This was a period when romanticism thrived, where poets in expressing their freedom of imagination could be labelled "worshippers of nature". Hence, the environment as a discourse is not entirely new in the world of literature.

Etymologically, 'ecopoetics' is a combination of two Greek words. Oikos, from which 'eco' is derived, implies 'house', 'a dwelling place', Poesis means 'making' or

'creation'. From the aforementioned, it can be deduced that ecopoetry is using poetry as a means to make a dwelling place, by extension; the whole earth. It often encourages nature poetry that is opposed to anthropocentrism, places high premium on human beings above every other thing, including nature. Ecopoetry has become a means of advocating for nature and dialoguing with it. The chief characteristic of ecopoetry as given by Engelhardt (2007) is that it is connected to the world in a way that implies responsibility. Also, Astley (2007) in his introduction to his poems also highlights some of the characteristics of eco-poetry thus: "ecopoetry goes beyond traditional nature poetry to take on distinctly contemporary issues Ecopoems dramatize the dangers and poverty of a modern world perilously cut off from nature and ruled by technology, self-interest and economic power" (15). Thus, ecopoetry is a form of poetry that recognizes and questions our pronounced alienation from nature, and proposes means of reconnecting. To an ecopoet, nature is not seen as a separate entity, but an equal being to humans and their existence. Besides, it can be established that ecopoetry is seen as a subset of environmental poetry. However, environmental poetry only foregrounds the existence of a human-nature relationship and its significance while ecopoetry moves a step further by not only taking cognizance of this relationship and its related problems, but also works towards finding solutions to these existing problems, thereby effecting a change. According to Leonard (1999), more than environmental poetry, ecopoetry can be defined "as poetry that persistently stresses human cooperation with nature conceived as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback system" (11). In a similar vein, Bryson (2002) defines ecopoetry as "a nature poetry sub-category that both maintains and moves beyond traditional romantic conventions in a way that more easily permits addressing the current nature-human relationship" (5).

Eco-poetry is invested with a longing to bring about change. The proposed change can only be achieved when there is an awakening of the consciousness of the populace, and that is what literature concerns itself with. Bate affirms this when he says that literature's business is geared towards creating awareness. Similar to physical parks which are relaxation centres where people chat and amuse themselves, ecopoetic space ought to provide a feeling of experiencing nature. Therefore, a genuine poet is charged with double responsibilities: being an imaginative geographer and a historian who records the unfriendliness and despoliation which accompany the birth of civilization. In Bate's words, such type of transformation demands "eco-poetic" consciousness though not essentially "eco-political" commitment (Dunning, 2013:70). Making mention of Rousseau, Burke, and Heidegger, Bate also affirms, "...ecopoetry can work on consciousness and subsequently affect change" (71). Besides, Ecocriticism is an examination of the relationship between literature and the environment from a multiple distinct academic perspective, as all sciences put in a collective effort to study the environment, and strive to proffer viable solutions to its pathetic state in recent times. In essence, ecocriticism is a reflection in literature of humans' interactions with their material and natural habitat.

In recent times, there is a surge of African writings chiefly committed to preserving the earth, originating most especially from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This spirit of eco-activism is ignited as a result of ecological issues, and by extension social issues with ecological implications, reminding humans of their responsibility to the earth. Moreover, Third world countries have been exploited and abused by a 21st century technology-driven world. Hence, there is a call to save the earth from the devastating torture of human interferences (anthropocentrism). Attempts at literary ecocriticism in Nigerian literature have largely focused on prose fictional works, and the poetry collections of older and second generation poets like Tanure Ojaide, and his never-ending combative poetry with the despoilers of his region. Consequently, little research has been carried out on the representation of environmental degradation in the poetry of emerging poets like Ibiwari Ikiriko and Albert Otto, and their confrontations with the perpetrators of such evil. Therefore,

this paper examines the collections of Ibiwari Ikiriko and Albert Otto, poets from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, as they reflect the degrading state of their environment plagued by carbon and gas flares, oil spillage and bunkering, felling of trees, and pollution of air and water by human activities. This study focuses on Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* and Otto's *Letters from the Earth*, as they add to the literary repository on ecological issues from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Having gone through the introduction to the study, the paper analyses poems from both collections that are thematically preoccupied with environmental degradation while paying attention to the literary devices/figurative language utilised in conveying the message. Besides, the analysis of poems from each collection is done under two different subheadings, respectively.

A Plea to Save the Earth in Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*

Ibiwari Ikiriko is a poet from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Niger Delta region is located in the southern part of Nigeria where an abundant amount of oil and gas is produced, hence, the genesis of ecological degradation. As such, the people from this region have been in constant struggle against the desecration of their environment, dispossession, exploitation and all forms of injustices meted to them. It is this dire scene that instigated Ikiriko's poetic muse. The poems in this collection centre on the theme of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region seeing that they make a subtle plea to interrupt a system that encourages the pillaging of their environment. Environmental degradation deals with the destruction of the flora and fauna of the environment. In the words of Swati et al. (2014), environmental degradation is "the deterioration of the environment through depletion of natural resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife".

The use of personification in the titling of the collection (*Oily Tears of the Delta*) humanises the pain that the Delta and its inhabitants experiences. The title also captures the writer's thoughts, thus informing the content of the poems. The environment has been plagued by the destructive effects of oil spillage and pollution, so much that the environment and its inhabitants where the oil is sourced are thrown into agonizing pains and tears. The tone of the poems is lachrymal and their distressing experience is as a result of what Bassey (2013) terms "destructive extraction". The companies involved in the extraction are not only extracting oil, but also wringing the lives of the inhabitants through their destructive practices. He recounts these malicious acts in his poem, "Gas flares":

Popping
A million explosions
A shower of soot
On open raw nerves
Oil's not well
That starts a well
Now the earth is ablaze
Where will the people go? (Bassey, 79)

The denizens of this Niger Delta region undergo a lot of traumatic experiences consequent upon the despoilers' activities. The poet, as a result, has chosen to be a voice for the voiceless who are rendered homeless and hopeless. He cannot afford to be quite in the midst of the overwhelming crisis ravaging his home and people. As a matter-of-factly, he is "immersed in cares/Like a cock in crude oil/Jugular glutted, glottis jaded" (*Evening already ii*, *Oily Tears*, 13). The use of simile and animal imagery gives a picture of the gripping pain of loss, and the depth of agony. Thus, the poet like a one-man army has "...resolved/Not to be wasted by time" but to stand up to the task of time. In the poem "*Evening already iii*" (*Oily Tears*, 14), the poet-persona, a metaphoric storyteller recounting moonlight tales, narrates the

ordeals of the populace. He tells "The story/...Of the mini minor/Marginalized by the mighty and plenty". The owners of the resources, who are the Niger Delta populace, never benefit from their community-generated wealth which has become a bane rather than a blessing. In spite of the bulk of oil being exported, no value seems to be added to the communities from which they are extracted. If anything is added at all, then, it is misery. They have become "the wretched of the earth" (Fanon, 1967), with their pipes of oil getting others well-heeled and impoverishing them. The poet-persona sadly tells

Of their cohorts
Whose steel actions
Turn to peace-proof people
Those wet with honest sweat (Oily Tears, 15)

The multinational foreign companies, who have formed alliance with the government keep enriching themselves and dispossessing the natives of their God-given natural resources. The locality is left thread-bare while the inhabitants are stripped of their peace and genuine labour. Their story has become a sour tale.

Similarly, in "Evening Already iv" (Oily Tears, 17), the poet-persona, as a representative for his people, continues in his description of the height of injustice displayed by the oppressors. The people suffer from land and property deprivation. Typical of Africans, the Niger Delta people attach a lot of utilitarian value to their land. Thus, when it is lost, everything feels gone, even the essence of life and living. This is as a result of the fact that the tie between an African man and his land is not only physical but also spiritual, as he enjoys communion with his ancestors. Ngugi (1972) reiterates this; "a culture has no meaning apart from the social organization of life on which it is built" (11). This life on which it is built being referred to here is land that is made up of inhabitants. More so, in Ngugi's *Homecoming*, Professor Bethwell Ogot and Fred Welbourn writes, "if a home is destroyed, whether the material house or the relationship between those who inhabit it, a new home must be found or its individual members become insecure, maladjusted, alien society..." (46). Therefore, the loss of land for the African man is a colossal one. It leaves him in destitution. With the aid of pun and repetition, the poet-persona, grief-stricken, prays thus:

And let this houselessness,
This homelessness,
This total dispossession
They visited on others
Be their lot
Let it be
The lot of their children
Let it be
The lot of their children's children (Oily Tears, 17).

The poet-persona wishes that the plunderers' generations be requited with the evils their fathers dished out on his people. The Niger Delta region experienced and is still experiencing a lot anguish in the hands of non-inhabitants of the land, oil companies, and foreigners who only see the land as theirs "to plunder and not to plough" (Osundare, 1986).

In another poem, "To the Niger Delta" (Oily Tears, 19), the poet-persona in a eulogy to the Niger Delta, compares the region to an Iroko tree and a china pot using the language of metaphor and simile. Obviously, the Iroko has survived numerous tempests and the china pot still retains its contents because they are well cared for.

The raffia pad serves well
Because the pitcherwoman cares
And renews it time to time.
The Iroko roots serve well
Because the boughs after receiving

Give to them their fair share (Oily Tears, 19)

Unfortunately, this is not Niger Delta's situation. This is due to the fact that the Niger Delta environment which has been a source of revenue for the government and nation at large is not given befitting treatment. Rather, with the use of metaphor, it is compared to a prisoner who "stay sentenced/To serve only as source and support," without being taken care of. Moreover, while pondering the moment the evil done against his region would end, the poet-persona makes use of rhetorical question; "Brave Delta, hail! But tell all/How long will this sentence last?" (19)

Likewise, in "Oily rivers" (Oily Tears, 20), the title suggests imagery of pollution. The rivers, in times past, were not only sources of water but also means of livelihood because one of the mainstays of the Niger Delta communities is fishing. However, with contaminated rivers, these are unachievable. The poet-persona weeps for his land "where things are made base/and beings become base". Value is no longer placed on life as human beings are oppressed and suppressed by any means possible. Using simile, the poet-persona gives an image of those draconian policies which have the community dwellers handicapped when he says that his people are "lessed by/powerful policies/crude as petroleum" (20) . Moreover, Darah (2014) captures these punitive policies succinctly:

There are other legislative shackles against the exercise of resource rights. For instance, section 2 of the Minerals and Mining Act No. 34 of 1999 declares that all "lands in which minerals have been found...shall be acquired by the Government of the Federation in accordance with the provisions of the Land Use Act..." A section of the same Act under reference says that "...all rivers, streams and water courses throughout Nigeria shall be vested in the Federation for and on behalf of the people of Nigeria"... The draconian laws and policies reviewed in the foregoing sections were enacted by dictatorial military regimes. However, all civilian governments in Nigeria from 1979 have perpetuated the injustice and exploitation (14,19).

The peoples' misery seems to be two-fold. On one hand, they are robbed of their land. On the other hand, the rivers are "oily/and can/neither/quench" the poet-persona's "thirst/nor/anoint" his "head" (Oily Tears, 20). The poet-persona as a representative for his people mourns the extent of this damage. The rivers are no more fit for drinking nor for cleansing of their bodies which is a lot more devastating. This is because the incursion of the oil companies spelt doom for the inhabitants, and rendered their chief source of water supply polluted through oil extraction and expropriation. This is recorded by Bassey (2013): "In at least ten Ogoni communities where drinking water is contaminated with high levels of hydrocarbons, public health is seriously threatened.... In one community, at Nsisoken Ogale, in western Ogoni land, families are drinking water from wells that are contaminated with benzene-a known carcinogen" (84). Symbolically, the rivers inability to satiate thirst or anoint head implies the inhabitants' loss of one of their basic means of subsistence, which is fishing.

The poet-persona furthers the discourse of deprivation and dispossession done to the inhabitants of his locality in the poem "Baseless compass" (Oily Tears, 21). The predicament of his people is compared to a space ship that is drifting using the language of metaphor. Not only do they lack anchor like the adrift space ship, they have every of their "rights/And benefits suspended". Their support systems represented by the leaders of their communities have been bought over by those who conspire to destroy their environment. Thus, the denizens are led by principals who themselves have lost directions and are "baseless compass" because they have been blinded by greed and have betrayed their own people. The poet-persona describes the forlorn state of his people thus:

Hope leaks out
From our insides
Leaving us empty

As a basket of water (Oily Tears, 21).

The choice of words and the use of simile fully depict the extent of their hopelessness. Moreover, the paradoxical phrase “basket of water” reverberates bleakness. They are bereft of any strand of hope. Despite the fact that they are the “Aborigines of the base”, where the source of wealth for the nation is sourced, they “stay, shattered like/A calabash of crabs/Crashed on concrete” (21). Simile yet again is employed to depict the state of despondency of the natives. Their base has made them baseless, and their lives are contradictions to the volume of wealth found there.

In “Okara’s nun” (Oily Tears, 25), the harrowing state of the environment is represented. The poet-persona laments the loss of this once “silver-surfaced/Nun” eulogized by Gabriel Okara in his famous poem, “The Call of the River Nun” which is ‘now/Crude-surfaced’. A contrast is drawn between Gabriel Okara’s original poem and Ikiriko’s version. In the former, the rivers in its pristine state, the rays of sunlight on them produced a glittering shine, thereby giving out a “silver-surfaced”. Conversely, the latter has been robbed of its unsoiled state and “lumpers/Along lifeless/Like dead wood.” The ruination that attends the rivers in the poet-persona’s locale is accentuated in the poem through the use of simile and repetition, where the poet-persona repetitively compares the sterile state of the rivers to “dead woods”. The rivers is now no-good as

It lumpers,
Reflecting nothing,
Invoking nothing
Reflecting nothing
Invoking nothing (Oily Tears, 25)

In times past, one could view his/her reflection on the water because of the transparency that comes with the river. Unfortunately, that cannot be said anymore about the rivers as their transparent state has been substituted with a turbid state due to disembody from oil companies. Moreover, for a traditional African man, both the land and rivers are highly totemic, possessing valuable significance because they take pleasure in a communing with their gods and ancestors who they believe, intervene in the cause of man. However, the despoliation of the rivers has made the place inhabitable for the gods, sending them out of their rivers where they had previously been enshrined. Hence, the creeks too are permeated with spillages from the oil companies. Besides, the “Kingfisher” has nothing to show for his fishing prowess, only

Wail tales
Of upcountry folks
Paupers, waking up millionaires
From a distance (Oily Tears, 26).

The tales of woes pervades the poem and summarises the experiences of the Niger Delta. The despoilers become millionaires at the expense of the owners of this wealth and on the basis of dispossession. The choice of words gives a picture of the condition of things in the region. Consequently, the rivers in the region have been robbed of its unsullied state and “Okara’s/Silver-surfaced/Nun/Is no more/Now/Effluent-effete, sludge-silvered”. Bassey (2013) reports this spoilage tersely: “crude oil extraction has effectively uprooted the people from the soil. It has polluted their waters and poisoned their air” (121). They are not only rendered homeless, but also jobless.

Likewise, in “The Fisherman’s net” (Oily Tears, 27), the poet-persona narrates the ordeals of a fisherman who went fishing with his “mended and remended” net. It cannot be overemphasised that fishing is one of the major means of subsistence for the people of the Niger Delta region. Usually, there are allocations from the government to the region from the revenues sourced from their land to cater for the inhabitants and the environment. However, the poet-persona reveals that

The Government net distribution gestures,
 Massive in the media, token in real terms,
 Never reached him. He only saw
 The fishing-port extension fisheries officers. (Oily Tears, 27).

Irony is the figurative expression for representing the contrast between what the government presents to the world, and the truth that is really obtainable in the region. In plain terms, the Government net distribution, sometimes, never even reaches the masses like the fisherman in the poem. This is the sad reality that characterises the poet-persona's locale. Matters are made worse for the fisherman when even the ragged fishing net he went fishing with is suddenly interrupted by "A Jumbo Tanker/ "An oil boat", in his own words," which "bursts into sea" dragging along his canoe, net and himself. Except for the timely intervention of the fisherman's machete which cuts the rope, his life would have made it into the records of countless lives swallowed up by the deep. With no fish at hand together with the loss of his tattered net to "the Jumbo", the fisherman sadly watches as the oil boat "sailing gaily away with her crude loot/or liquid gold and the net/To decorate other lands and lives". A minority of the people became beneficiaries of the wealth meant for the majority who languish in penury. Moreover, they have no right over the abundance of resources supplied to the nation from their society. Rather, the government and the oil companies dictate the rules and the populace are drained to enrich at the helm. This is contradictory because the "people and communities where these resources are found are the bona fide owners and they should exercise authority over the way the assets are exploited and utilized" (Darah, 2014:7).

In another poem, "The Palm and the crude" (Oily Tears, 31) the poet-persona validates the fact that the crude oil from which the wealth of the nation is accumulated was sourced from his locality. Besides, he presents the contrast between the seasons of the palm and the crude. With the aid of pun, repetition and Biblical allusion, the poet-persona, sorrow-laden, relives the memories of a time in history of his once serene and productive land.

In the beginning
 Was the Palm
 And the Palm
 Was of us
 And the Palm
 Was by us
 And the Palm
 Was with us" (Oily Tears, 31)

Then, they enjoyed the dividends of the palm tree which not only "oiled our palms/Balmed our joints, but also "Sweetened our insides/And anointed our heads" (31) until the emergence of the crude and the rude interruption of the pillagers, led by the oil explorers and exploiters. With the Palm, they were "proud partners/Merchants and Missions". However, the invasion of the multinational foreign oil companies left the land in wreckage as they would not leave the crude oil in the soil, and off course, the Niger Delta inhabitants lost ownership of the crude. Hence, they could not mediate over its use. The despoilers took total control, polluted and "wasted our water/Soiled our soils/And lacerated our lot" (32). Bassey (2013) records this level of pollution: "the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has the reputation of being one of the most polluted places on earth. That reputation has been taken as a given, due to physical evidence of degradation" (84). The land becomes a shadow of its past as these plunderers cart away "dunes boom" of wealth, leaving them "with/Maritime doom".

"Delta Tears" (Oily Tears, 33) continues bemoaning the heart-rending shape of the present landscape of the Niger Delta region. As a matter-of-factly, the poem begins on a lamentable note which is suggested through the choice of words at the beginning of the poem; "Ailing Delta, hail!" Moreover, the title itself is lachrymal. The poet-persona, using the language of simile, reminisces over the past when he could play on shore "Like sardines

once upon a time/Before what happened/Happened in your scape". In the event of oil discovery and extraction, the region became a shadow of itself. Personification and simile are employed in describing the present state of the region when the poet-persona tells of "...the oily tears on your wrinkled face/Condition curved like crayfish". The land is destroyed and crinkled while the people are in distress. Besides, deploying apostrophe as a literary device, the poet-persona informs "Mother Delta, Lord Forest and Lord Mangrove" how these scavengers in human form have "looted" their "insides", "confiscated" their "lives" and "stolen" their "everything". The Niger Delta communities almost have nothing to show for housing the nation's resources because they are bereft, expropriated and ousted. They are not only displaced, but also their creeks are now devoid of the protein enriching nutrients such as; tilapia, periwinkle, snail, oyster and watch-shell. The creeks have been replaced with "pale plains of sand and mud, burrowed and gaunt". Moreover, "the coated seascape smells" of "Oil and tar and gas", while the "fishes grope and gasp/For way and life, belly-up" (36). The forests and mangroves are not left out in this destructive exercise. In his fury, the poet-persona commands the "Constricting Boa, Spirit/Of Oceans and Creeks" to overthrow these "profit-mongers" as they make their departure from the decrepit territory through the sea with their ill-gotten wealth. He says:

Constricting Boa, the predators
Have burrowed past the numb segment
And it's time to constrict, crush,
And grind insatiate bones and all (Oily Tears, 37).

The Niger Delta region is in such a debilitating state that the spokespersons for the people from these despoiled localities cannot but become ardent eco-activists. Though, there has always been a move to silent (both temporally and permanently) eco-activists from these regions. The move to muffle the spirit of eco-activism has been in existence as far back the 1990s. The poet-persona calls to mind the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa, one of the foremost environmental activists from the Niger Delta, who fought for the cause of the people. He was one of the nine Ogoni citizens that were executed by the General Sani Abacha's government. Darah (2014) chronicles this, "Ogoni calamity was in the mid 1990s and eminent Ogoni citizens lost their lives. The police and the military were involved in the bloody suppression of the Ogoni revolt. After the hanging of the nine Ogoni activists in 1995, a special security squad spread terror and killing throughout the district" (31).

The poem "Remembering Saro-Wiwa" (Oily Tears, 39) reminds us of one of the fighters for environmental freedom. He was "a writer" and "a righter". Saro-Wiwa was a Nigerian writer who sought to right the wrongs done to his community and region at large through his writings. Moreover, he strove non-violently against environmental degradation. Also, he was critical of the Nigerian government who was an accomplice to the crime committed against his community by the foreign petroleum companies, as the government also derived revenue from the despoliation of the environment. It is a poem of reminiscence. Unfortunately, the system which took Saro-Wiwa's life as he fought against it seems to still be very much in existence, and the affected regions are still seriously deteriorating. The poet-persona reiterates;

Let's not forget
That the cause
Of his hanging
Is still clinging
To the bottom of oil wells (Oily Tears, 39).

Apparently, the course for which Saro-Wiwa fought for which also claimed his life is not yet over as oil wells are still proliferating rather than decreasing, thereby causing environmental degradation to snowball. With the aid of repetition, enjambment and the language of simile, the poet-persona remarks; "And let's not forget/that his hanging/is still

sticking/to the remains of our conscience/like sludges on mud-flat. The use of repetition seems to lay emphasis on the fact that the reason for which life was snuffed out of Saro-Wiwa is still very much felt in the community. By implication, it will be injustice to the dead if the battle against environmental damage is abandoned and not won in the end.

Despite the current degenerated state of the Niger Delta region, Ikiriko is resolute that soonest his land will rise again. The poet-persona sounds the alarm of hope in the poem "Odi" (Oily Tears, 63). Odi is a town in Bayelsa State. According to Nigerian history, in November 20, 1999, the Nigerian president (President Olusegun Obasanjo) ordered an invasion of the town, which he believed was a hideout for alleged killers of some policemen. The invasion led to the burning down of the town and displacement of its denizens. The poet-persona worriedly asks the rhetorical question;

Did Odi do the deed
To be razed defunct, and the remainder
Natives homeless and borrow villages
To mourn the dawning millennium? (Oily Tears, 63)

The poet-persona expresses the pain that Odi did not deserve the judgement meted out by the government. The inhabitants were rendered homeless and helpless as they had to seek shelter in some other villages to mourn their loss and the new millennium (Year 2000). Their land as well as their lives was razed. The language of repetition permeates the poem. By extension, Odi symbolizes the Niger Delta region. Therefore, as the poet-persona is hopeful of the rising again of the town, so is he about the Niger Delta. He concludes by saying;

But as no tears can rend a calabash of community will,
So will Odi rise again
Like the Son on an Easter morning
And lighten this darkness wreathed Delta (Oily Tears, 64).

The poet-persona is optimistic that just like Jesus Christ rose on the third day on Easter Sunday so will his community flourish again. Moreover, his use of simile and biblical allusion to a supreme being's action foregrounds the poet-persona's confidence in a definite rebirth.

The collection *Oily Tears of the Delta* relates the agonizing pains and pangs that the Niger Delta region and its populace experience. Despite the fact that their region is home to the wealth generated to enrich the nation, their lives are painted with abject poverty and multiple destitutions. The journey to misery and anguish for the Niger Delta communities began with discovery and unbridled extraction of oil. The boom became their doom as their blessing became a bane. In the midst of all these, the poet clamours for justice for his land and the inhabitants.

Concern for the Fate of the Earth in Otto's Letters from the Earth

This collection is a metaphorical letter from the "desk" of the earth. The poems amplify a concern for the fate of the earth. The poet, as an ecological reformer, would not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the earth's misery; rather, he sticks out his neck for the cause of the earth, specifically, the deteriorating and debilitating state of the Niger Delta region, which is a microcosm of the whole earth. The poet has refused to remain mute in the midst of all of these mishaps. This is because when silence takes the front stage, and many writers take a "leave" from art's embattled struggle and preoccupation with socio-ecological malaise, adversity will be engendered and an indifferent attitude becomes inevitable or sets in. In time past, the quietness of some African writers as regards the new form of colonial exploitation of Africa (environmental degradation included [emphasis mine]), the depriving culture of her comprador capitalism, disheartening socio-economic oppositions, truly intensify their disturbed state of mind (Osundare, 2007:22).

Albert Otto also hails from the Niger Delta region, a region that houses grand amounts of natural resources, oil and gas inclusive. He is an emerging ecological poet who

champions the course of the earth like one championing the course of life itself. For the poet, he has a responsibility to the earth; hence, he takes a forward march, leading his people, against those anthropocentric activities that destroy their ecosystems. In affirming this line of action, Achebe (1958) posits: “the African writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front” (45).

In the collection, Otto begins by making a clarion call to the friends of the earth. In the poem, “The herald” (Letters, 17), using the language of metaphor, the poet-persona likens his pen to a rooster that awakes humans to dawn. In this case, he employs his “crowing pen” to awaken the consciousness of the people. He acts as a go-between mediating the course between “tractors and the trees”, “the gases and the galaxies”, “the sewages and the seas”, and “the conqueror and the conquered Earth”. The poet-persona pleads that the entire populace “turn” their “green faces to the earth.” Use of symbol as a literary device is evident here where Green represents environmental friendliness or consciousness. Therefore, the poet-persona implores the general public, most especially the earth’s pillagers, to consider the depleted state of the earth and turn a new leaf. While summoning the people to swing into action to save the earth, the poet-persona pledges his life-long loyalty to salvage the earth from further destruction. He boldly asserts:

I clutch my eco-friendly pen
A sticker for sanity,
A trumpeter for tranquility.
Arise, if you love Earth green, now (Letters, 17).

The poet-persona is committed to change as well as a ready change agent who seeks to bring about the desired change in his community, and world at large. He desires to right wrongs through his writing and to interrupt a ruthless system which thrives on oppression. The poet certifies Osundare’s (2007) designation of a true writer: “a real writer has no alternative to being in constant conflict with oppression. Like the prophet of the Old Testament, he is the guilty conscience of the king, his words the nagging, unremitting images in his mind, his words are an incitement to revolt, to disrupt the deathly equilibrium, the mendacious “peace and stability” of a truly violent system” (7).

As the poet-persona beseeches the friends of the earth to confront the despoilers of the earth, he is very much hopeful that the earth will blossom again despite the several destructions. He expresses this optimism in “This earth shall arise” (Letters, 18), as he is confident of the fact that the “This Earth shall arise among/The benign Sun and Moon”. The poet-persona, with an unapologetic tone, emphasises what the earth is not meant for:

For this Earth is not for a hellish hydrosphere
Of toxic trash and radioactive ruins
Sunk at seas that corrode man
And exile fishes and kill coral reefs (Letters, 18).

Rather, “this Earth is our Potter’s pot.../a haven” that inhabits “friendly faces” with “paradisiac places”. The language of metaphor is evidently used in the poem to describe the earth. The poet-persona stops at nothing to disabuse the minds of the despoilers of the earth of the unfitting use to which they have subjected the earth. He also outlines the relevance of the earth to humans and the privileges alongside the wholesome human-nature relationship humans can enjoy by preserving the earth when he says that “...this virtuous Earth shelters us from/Baking sunlight and vengeful snowfall”. This act displayed by the poet reminds the reader of Osundare’s (2007) description of a writer as one who “...by virtue of his ability to transcend quotidian reality, has a duty to relate not only how things are, but how they could or should be” (12). Hence, the task/business of protecting the earth should not be seen as a compulsion, rather, an obligation because of the embedded advantages. The poet-persona, like the earth’s mouthpiece, advocates the cause of the earth, and makes a plea for

environmental conservation. Besides, for a traditional African man, the forests serve curative purposes because natural herbs extracted from them have been and are still used to cure different ailments. As a result, the poet-persona summons these earth's spoilers to ponder on the medical implication of losing the earth, because it is "home for benevolent forests" which provide "Medicine that bestows healing on my head." (18) As a defender of the fate of the earth, he ceaselessly pleads for the earth which is "the home of homes", and advises that it should not be turned into a metaphorical hell because "This Earth is not hell!"

Similarly, the poem "The conflagration" (Letters, 21)) depicts an image of an inferno or a hell-like place which the earth has been condemned to as a result of the "cancerous smoke and smog" emitted from the mechanical pumps, mostly powered by gas, used for the artificial extracting of oil and production of crude oil which is directly released into the air. Besides, the volatile compounds emitted as gases "upon blasting of crude missiles/...vomit dark dollops of deleterious soot" which are also directly introduced into Earth's atmosphere, contaminating the air a great deal and causing "fair Delta" to burn. Such is the deplorable state of the Niger Delta environment where crude oil is mainly being extracted, processed and produced in Nigeria. With the aid of simile and imagery, the poet-persona ruefully paints a picture of the Niger Delta terrain:

Yonder fly flames, flickering on skyline high
Dark orbs twirl overhead; of ribbons of soot
Clustered, like full-rigged parachutes dancing
And heaving their bulks to an erotic soundtrack (Letters, 21)

The poem also takes the reader back to the oil pipeline explosion near Oviru court incident that took place in 2000 where "earth-quaking blusters of fireballs/consume neglected pounds of/folks...", plunged families in sorrow, leaving them with "sobbing eyes" to "drab their dead in fern fronds" while providing "the wheeling vultures" a "graceful laze-and-feed" feast. It also reminds one of Idjerhe (Sapele) incident. Darah (2014) records the aforementioned incident; "...the Ogoni agony was still raw and consuming human casualties, a pipeline fire holocaust occurred in Idjerhe (Jesse) area near Sapele in Delta State in October 1998. A burst portion of the Warri-Kaduna trunk-line conveying refined products flooded farmlands near the community. There was an acute scarcity of petrol and kerosene at the time and the hapless citizens besieged the site to fetch fuel. Like an atomic bomb blast, an explosion happened and an inferno engulfed the scene" (32).

Moreover, animals are not spared the ruthless torture and terror of ecoterrorists. In the poem "The Malady of Elephant" (Letters, 22), the poet-persona, using rhetorical question as a dominant literary device, questions the despoilers: "Do they deserve these skin-etching deaths? The glorious African elephants?" The "raid-and-run poachers, wolves" who come with "Barking rifles in hand, carrying plunder" as they "Slay the mountainous elephant for their moonish tusks/Like mindless gorillas in a genocidal war." The tusks of elephants are hunted commercially as they are used in manufacturing ivory for artifacts, jewellery, and other items like piano keys, amongst others; thus, the reason for the indiscriminate hunting and poaching which has had a significant effect on the numbers of elephants in Africa. The choice of diction employed by the poet-persona expresses the pain of misery as he regrets "the elephants dying with grief/Their glassy eyes secreting hot tears". This reckless killing of "the glorious elephants" and "Africa's priceless treasures" is due to "the cruelty/Of commerce", as life is snuffed out of them for the sake of enriching humans. The poet-persona's lamentation seems unending as these earth torturers appear unrelenting. They do not only dispossess the environment of the flora but also the fauna.

Similarly, in the poem, "The Embattled Coast" (Letters, 24), the poet-persona grieves over the level of the damage of the "coast". He paints an image of this shore which now "...splashes/Black oil out-glittering pure gold" enriching others while "Rotting and frothing to nothing..." These defilers of nature do not stop only at growing rich by pauperizing

others, they also use their “fringes of derricks” which the poet-persona, using the language of simile, compares to “crab pincers” to “spill” the “oily milk” of the Niger Delta region. Afterwards, these “burrow creatures” still go about exploiting their vendees, disposing of the crude oil at such an exorbitant rate with an offer of “one barrel for one pound”, aside turning their streams or estuaries into “putrefaction pools for worms” as a result of the oil spillage. The dwellers in such communities, where these cruel acts are carried out, are not only deprived of their natural endowment, the exploiters also:

... crush her creeks;
They maim her men
And draw fierce forces daily (Letters, 24).

The people's lustrous land became a shadow of its former self, with “her mangrove woods” wilted “Like the wrinkled and ripped wrapper/Of a wizened widow.” Here, the poet-persona reports the magnitude of the destruction of the Niger Delta region where trees are not leniently dealt with. The mangrove and water-clogged areas of Nigeria is home to the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Ilaje of the Niger Delta. Therefore, the destruction of the mangrove implies a huge loss to the residents in such locales. In the long run, they lose everything, even their freedom of speech, to these despicable fellows who are also the first to tongue-lash the region, mockingly calling out:

“Southern Minor! Southern Minor!”
No MANGROVE
No orange WEAVER,
No VOICE (Letters, 24)

The moaning continues in the poem “Earth's captives” (Letters, 30). The title of the poem is suggestive of a bastille. The poet-persona begins by elegizing the woes that have befallen nature in the face of ecocide. The poet-persona, like a raconteur, recounts the condemned state of “a febrile Earth/That chokes with noxious breath” from “fumes”, emitted from the machines powering the oil rigs, which is “Huge enough to drag down acidic rains”. The tale of the Niger Delta and its populace is ingrained in throes. The poet-persona presents an envenomed Earth

Of wastes and beheaded trunks;
Of spills that swim to the banks of rivers;
Of fishes fleeing from oil spills to be trapped... (Letters, 30)

The earth literally became a dumping site for all sorts of dangerous anthropocentric activities such as felling of trees, oil spillage, amongst others, which reduce the earth to rubble. With all of these, the poet-persona is quick to warn these capitalists that “Nothing makes us captives quickly/Than declaring war on Earth--”. Thus, destroying the earth is tantamount to rendering humans captives by their own doings, because the existence of human beings is hinged on the existence of the Earth. The choice of diction and the use of imagery give a picture of captivity to which the denizens in the Niger Delta have been subjected to owing to environmental degradation.

In the same way, “Okworo river” (Letters, 33), through the use of a syntactic structure which has a semblance to “Egyptian pyramids”, the poet-persona foregrounds the theme of environmental degradation. He reminisces about the good old days in his community before the advent of oil extraction and exploitation when

raffia palms towered over
ferns, boiling with sweet wine at
Ohiamini Okworo : creek with sludge of
leaves and wood pieces, when you walked through it (Letters, 33)

This was the situation of the river in the poet-persona's community in the past. The imagery depicts a pristine society. However, with the turn of events, the community takes a

new shape as life has not only been drained out from the river, but the river is also polluted. After a long departure from his community, the poet-persona revisits and he is greeted with

... raging dredgers
that dredged life out of my river. I blinked,
they became herds of sand-filled canoes. And the
only sign of life were trekking shadows on the new bridge (Letters, 33).

The pyramidal structure of the lines of the poem is suggestive and emphatic. It creates an image of the river in the poet-persona's community which has become a heap of "sand-filled canoes" and no more carriages for fishing because of the absence of a river to fish in. This is as a result of "the dredgers" used by those oil wells time and again, to drill and snatch life from the river, thereby, replacing fishing dragnets.

In "Wrecked cities" (Letters, 34), the poet-persona extends his discourse of environmental depredation to include not only the oil exploiters, but also those who have turned the rivers into refuse bins for "plastic pollutants". Also, the "rotten sewage" which is allowed to run into the river, rubbishing "the city streams" and gradually turning the river into a "dead sea" is another angle of environmental degradation which the poet underscores. Additionally, he relays the activities of "the butcher men" and "their market women", who keep polluting the air with the soot from their roasting of the skin of a cow/goat that someone would think that they were roasting tyre. With a lachrymal tone, the poet-persona bewails thus:

They have turned
Pampered streets into putrid streets
Modern sites into mouldering sites (Letters, 34)

The Niger Delta region has not only been plundered, but her citizenry have also been denied access to resources to which they are bona fide owners. As a result, "...the people of the region have been engaged in a determined struggle to be free from the yoke of resource dispossession, economic exploitation, and political oppression" (Darah, 2014:7).

The poet-persona concludes this section of his collection that centres on environmental degradation with a ray of hope in the midst of this traumatic and distorted reality with the poem, "Hope lulls the earth" (Letters, 38). Like Ikiriko's expression of hope in "Odi", the poem is replete with images of hope. The poet-persona, like a seer, foresees an end in sight to all the earth's misery, and rejuvenation for all accumulated destruction. Therefore, he appears optimistic and confident when he says;

I see everything beautiful—
After a long chemical holocaust
Caked our earth and ruined lives—
Crystal-clear streams, animals
Edifices, evergreen forests, and
Well-watered parks...
And hope lulls the earth (Letters, 38).

Otto's Letters from the Earth is ingrained in a lot of metaphors and imageries which appeals for the conservation and preservation of the earth against environmental degradation, particularly the Niger Delta region. Moreover, the poems record the traumatic experiences of the inhabitants in the face of ecocide as they relive the people's ordeals. Therefore, the poet confronts the despoilers of the ecosystem and also beckons on the friends of the earth everywhere to save the earth.

2. CONCLUSION

The extent of damage recorded in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, which is a microcosm of the whole earth, is immeasurable. Darah (2014) affirms this, "on the average,

the Niger Delta experiences one spillage each day. Massive blow-outs and burst pipes discharge hazardous and poisonous substances into water sources, soils, forests, and human settlements. Gas flaring has been going on for decades in about 200 fields” (50). More so, it might take a “long walk to freedom” (Mandela, 1994) before the situation is fully salvaged. However, the poets, Ikiriko and Otto, are not discouraged as they still see hope amidst hopelessness, and advocate for environmental sustainability.

Otto's collection of poems, *Letters from the Earth*, is encompassing compared to Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*. The former covers a range of environmental degradation which includes; felling of trees, pollution of water bodies with toxic substances, contamination of the air with gas flares, demoting the streets to lavatories and the merciless killing of animals. On the other hand, Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* focuses more on oil spillage and its resultant effect on the affected communities. However, despite “...the repressive and oppressive instruments used against them, the people of the Niger Delta have been resolute in their struggle to redeem their violated rights” (Darah, 19-20). This is fully exemplified by these poets. Therefore, these poets cannot help but mobilize poetry as a means for clamouring for environmental justice.

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