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Monumental Inhumanity beyond Tears: Lamentations of Despoil in Nagaland and Niger Delta Eco-poetics

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Abstract

This paper examines the social interventions, inclinations and paradigms in Temsula Ao's poem "My Hills" and Tanure Ojaide's poem "Delta Blues" as reflections and interrogation of deplorable human actions propelling the degradation eco-heritage in Nagaland Northeast India, and Niger Delta south-south Nigeria. Thus, our focus will be on how both poets present similarities in their lamentations and advocacy against monumental inhumanity destroying natural environment. Therefore, drawing from the concepts of eco-criticism, this paper examines nuance of advocacy and interrogation of the direct/indirect complicity and disinterest subsumed in the shades of actions and inactions of both 'insiders' and 'others' who are in many ways, interwoven in the social malaises and negativities Ao and Ojaide project. To add rigor to the analysis, this paper adopts 'eco-criticism', to discuss the portrayal of social identity questions, environment despoil, and the subsisting human/environment symbiosis in Nagaland and Niger Delta as portrayed in the selected poems. In the end, the study observes that the selected poems are advocacy texts subsumed in nuances of social intervention paradigms that project certain universal commons reflective of inhabitants of regions in despoil and environment degradation.

Keywords: Heritage, identity, poem, northeast India, eco-criticism, intervention

Introduction

Temsula Ao and Tanure Ojaide are literary icons, who through their creative visions make poetry that provides the literary representation of realities in their societies which variously offer a valuable opportunity to their readers to deepen their knowledge about the designated subjects from diverse perspectives. While a good number of scholars have examined the poetics of Ao and Ojaide in many ways, none have looked at how Ao's "My Hills" and Ojaide's "Delta Blues" share clear commonalities in their portrayal of eco-heritage despoil. Therefore, this paper presents an analysis of Ao's¹ poem "My Hills" from the collection of poems titled *Book of Songs* (2013) and Ojaide's "Delta Blues" a poem in a collection of poems captioned *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998). The aim is to deepen our understanding of both writers' common point-of-view regarding the catastrophic destruction of eco-heritage in Nagaland in India and Niger Delta in Nigeria as monumental inhumanity. Our purview is to discuss how both poets similarly portray certain human actions as variables that adversely alter eco-heritage and the reasons behind their

effusive interest. More so, we intend to examine how the designated poems mirror analogous throes manifestly reflecting despoils and agony as collective and personal experiences in Nagaland and Niger-Delta. To analyse how both poems fall within the eco-poetry category, we are applying the concept of eco-criticism to discuss the poets' presentations of human-environment relationships in their poems. This paper, through an interpretive approach, attempts an elaborate explanation of some of the artistic techniques evident in Ao's "My Hills" and Ojaide's "Delta Blues". More so, we shall examine the efficacy of both poems in encapsulating their lamentations and what we can deduce as the metaphorical meanings subsumed in the poems. In order to place the frame of our study and thematic areas of focus in clear perspectives devoid of ambiguity, we shall start by explaining what the following expressions, eco-heritage, eco-criticism, and eco-poetry variously denote in the context of this study.

Eco-heritage, Eco-criticism, and Eco-poetry: Perspectives

Eco-heritage represents all naturally occurring flora, fauna, topography, habitat, and eco-system that exist in a given geographical location. The word eco-heritage suggests that the above mentioned are components part of a natural environment, which means that they are not originally man-made; rather they are nature's gift to humanity. In his description of natural environment, Oluwafemi Sunday Alabi (2021) notes:

In all encompassing words, natural environment refers to the physical set-up which encompasses earth, air, water, land, trees, fauna, flora, rivers, lakes, mountains, hill, valley, the seasons and all original inhabitants of a given geographical location which can be harmed by man's activities. (2)

Thus, it is essential for people dwelling in a given geographical location to recognize that their environment (both the living and non-living things) is an inheritance that must be preserved, conserved, and banqueted to the next generation. Thus, eco-criticism is a meticulous attempt to discuss how people's proper management or mismanagement of their eco-heritage is portrayed in literature and arts. The term 'eco-criticism' was first used by William Rueckert in his 1978 pioneering essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism" to discuss how ecology and its concepts are critically relayed in literary studies. According to Susie Brien (2007) the argument presented by Rueckert in his eco-criticism conceptual frame, revolves around the supposition that "the environment is in a state of crisis, largely of human making, and that urgent action is required if future disaster, encompassing humans and other species, is to be averted" (179). Thus, eco-criticism according to Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) which began to evolve as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii), have attained relevance in interpretive study of film and environment, music and environment, and fine art and environment. The idea here is that an eco-critic, (a scholar interested in interpreting the shades and nuances of ecology and eco-heritage management/preservation and/or mismanagement/degradation representation in arts and literature), needs to understand that literature, in many ways, represents peoples' creative attempts to share their thoughts and ideas on any subject of their choice. Also, an eco-critic needs to appreciate that essentially the thoughts and ideas creative writers and artists share, emanate from one or a combination of emotions and feelings, such as anger, grief, happiness, melancholy, fear, nostalgia, paranoia and disillusionment (see Onuora *et al*/2021; Okpara *et al*/2020; Brady 2013; Carroll 2003; Davies 1994; Dewey 1934; Kemp 2021; Robinson

2005). In support of the above supposition, scholarly findings indicate that the emotions and feelings individuals are filled with, are differently propelled by the altering influences emanating from human realities (Gary 2021; Okpara *et al*/2020; Robinson 2017; Tilghman 1970). Consequently, the thoughts and ideas which poets (like every other creative artists) share, are essentially the shades of their inclinations, interests, ideologies, worldviews and desires, which are either literally or metaphorically embedded in the words of their poems. Therefore, it is logical and plausible to assert that since poets are humans, poetry is a human artistic product, which like other human artistic products, is naturally propelled and defined by the quantity and quality of the poet's accumulated knowledge, ideas, experiences, creative vision, ideological bent, mental health, inclinations, and agenda. For this reason, literary critics in their works variously aim at deepening the understanding of the aforementioned variables.

In essence, eco-criticism as an analytical frame "takes as its subject, the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" and "as a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (Glotfelty 1996: xix). The context of 'the human and nonhuman' as applied by Glotfelty in his comment above, denotes creative representation of human actions such as the preservation or degradation of eco-heritage components, for instance water (rivers, streams, and lakes), fauna and flora, which are all nonhuman. To Lawrence Buell *et al* (2011) eco-criticism is an eclectic cross-disciplinary initiative that "aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment" (418). What this means is that eco-criticism covers efforts by eco-critics to dissect and interpret eco-critical works, to explain their relevance and contributions towards the pursuance of knowledge and awareness regarding human realities. Also, eco-criticism enhances the appreciation of the writers' attempts at propagating their point-of-views on matters concerning the actions and inactions of man that adversely affect environment, eco-system and eco-heritage.

On individual or collective experiences as source materials for eco-poetry, Champa Chettri (2019) observes that "in different periods, poets adopted varied themes and modes of expression" to aid their attempts at portrayal and representation of social realities, in a bit to re-aggregate people worldview, ideology and behaviour (3). Essentially, Chettri is of the view that "poets are influenced by social, political and economic circumstances of their period", and that "their surroundings, milieu, history and culture not only shape their poetry but also become important ingredients of their works" (2019: 3). Chettri's contribution indicates that poets usually draw inspiration from their experiences and when these experiences form the thematic basis of their poems, their poetry can be classified as 'poetry of witness'. The idea here is that 'poetry of witness' are poems that project 'unequivocal social message' because the information they communicate are based on actual realities. As regards 'poetry of witness' the core essence is that a poet "writes about what he has personally gone through and not what he has imagined" (Chettri 2019: 4). For Ao and Ojaide, their representations in 'My Hills' and "Delta Blues" respectively are based on what they have witnessed. Therefore, it makes sense to refer to both poems as socially engaged poetry because they are unambiguously purpose driven attempts. As Carolyn Forché (1993) puts it, poets use their poetry "to speak for more than one and to engage all others" (34). Hence, eco-poets such as Ao and Ojaide arguably fit into the above category because as we shall see in the analysis

of their designated poems, both aim at creating awareness that propel the promotion of germane point-of-views that could lead to positive change in people's behaviour.

Nagaland and Niger-Delta Despoil as Source Material for Ao and Ojaide's 'Poetry of Witness'

Nagaland in Northeast India

The source material for Ao's poem "My Hills" is from the realities in Nagaland. To get a clearer understanding of her source material, we shall take a look at relevant scholarly contributions espousing pertinent aspects of Nagaland, as means of providing proper background to Ao's themes and inclinations. According to Patricia Mukhim (2005), "what is referred to as North-east India happens to be a land mass with a geographical area of 2.55 lakh sq.kms., which is a mere seven percent of the country's total area" (178). Furthering, she notes that "the region shares only two percent of its boundary with India, while the remaining 98 percent is bordered by the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, and China" (Mukhim, 2005: 178). In addition, she observes that "in terms of their physical features, ethnicity, culture, food habits, and language, there is a closer affinity with the people of Southeast Asia than the population of mainstream India" (178). Nagaland is one among the eight states in Northeast India with Kohima as its capital and it became the sixteenth state of India on the 1st December 1963. Nagaland is divided into eleven districts and it shares borders with Assam to the west, Manipur to the south, Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam to the north, and Myanmar to the east. On tribal demography in Nagaland, Chettri (2019) states that "there are sixteen major Naga tribes in Nagaland namely Ao, Angami, Sumi, Lotha, Chakesang, Kachari, Kuki, Konyak, Phom, Chang, Sangtam, Rengma, Yimchunger, Pochury, Zeliang, and Khamniungan" and that "other Naga tribes are also found in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Myanmar" (175). Chettri (2019) further observes:

The Nagas are not a homogenous tribe; each of the tribes has distinct cultural tradition, social structure, rituals, festivals, folklores, belief system, dialect, costumes and immensely rich heritage handed down through generations. They believed in a supreme creator, many deities, spirits and medicine-men, who appease and banish these spirits according to the requirements. English is the official state language and the medium for education in Nagaland and intertribal communication is carried out in Nagamese. (175)

The Northeast India is gifted phenomenally with abundant resources and breath-taking topography and eco-system, however, due to a bitter long-drawn conflict between the Indian government and the Naga freedom fighters; the eco-heritage has been monumentally altered. According to Paula Banerjee and Ishita Dey (2018):

By early 1951, the Nagas asked for a plebiscite and were predictably refused. Under the auspices of NNC, the Nagas themselves called a plebiscite in which almost everyone voted in favour of independence. On 16 May 1951, that plebiscite was held in which 99.9 percent voted to reassert the Naga position in favour of an independent homeland devoid of domination and political control of any sort. (2012: 8)

War was ignited after the Indian government declared the 1951 plebiscite null and void; consequently, the Naga people gradually began to dissent through insurgencies. In response, the government called in the military to crush the rebellion. The armed conflict which has exerted and

has continued to exert a massive toll on the environment and its inhabitants is infamously acknowledged as the longest armed conflict in South Asia (Kikon, 2005; Longkumer, 2018).

This conflict has adversely altered the Nagaland ecology and landscape, leaving behind a deplorable and degraded eco-heritage, which Ao bitterly laments in her poems "Lament for an Earth" (1988), "Blessings" (1988), and "My Hills" (2013). In their essay titled "An Ecocritical Reading of Poetry from India's Northeast" (2017) Neeraj Sankyan and Suman Sigroha examine the presentation of human-environment relationship in the writings of Temsula Ao and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, who are both poets from Northeast India. They looked at how their eco-poetry was "informed by a deep love and concern for their indigenous cultures, traditions and fragile environments" (Sankyan & Sigroha, 2017: 57). Furthermore, they observe that Ao's poems in many ways represent "a poetic voice that employs the power of lyric to raise environmental awareness amongst the peoples of these regions" (Sankyan & Sigroha, 2017: 57). Thus, Sankyan and Sigroha (2017) observe that Ao's poems "serve as an urgent reminder to the indigenous people of their great cultural heritage comprising sustainable customs and traditions" (57). Similarly, Ray P. Prajna (2016) observes that writers from Northeast India echo stirring words through their writings in their attempts to "give voice to the people's narrative suppressed by the meta-narrative of conflict and terror" (70). Furthering, Prajna (2016) notes:

These suppressed narratives demand recounting and sharing. Writers from Indian hinterland, Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, just like their contemporaries Arupa Patangia Kalita, Mitra Phukan, Anjum Hasan, tell stories of marginalized people to save their history from being silenced and forgotten. (70)

For instance, in "Lament for an Earth" Ao laments the degradation and destruction of the ecology through avoidable human actions, and in "My Hills" she projects the shades and nuances of irony, traumatic experiences, aggression and conflict with deep analysis of human conditions at different levels of the society. The conflicts between underground rebels and the Indian Forces in Nagaland can be considered a domestic conflict as it is limited to a particular region and involves few ethnic groups claiming territorial sovereignty. This is because "the unfair representation of the region in the nationalist discourse has had an adverse effect on the psyche of the people who felt wronged by an indifferent Indian State" (Sankhyan and Sigroha, 2017: 113).

In their study titled 'Psychosocial Impacts of War and Trauma in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*' Raam Kumar T. & B. Padmanabhan looked at the psychological impact of domestic violence over the combatants as well as non-combatants whose lives are inseparably intertwined with violence and bloodshed, observe that violence in Nagaland have generated "unbearable trauma and misery" (2020: 1). To Poimila Raman (2018) "violence and political unrest in the North-Eastern states of India go hand in hand in disrupting the ordinary lives of the people" (140). In their description of the sense of catastrophe in Nagaland as subsumed in Ao's poems, Neeraj Sankhyan and Suman Sigroha observe that violence perpetrated by the insurgents engaging in rebellion and the harsh retributive response of the Indian military have generated massive devastation, hence:

The endangering of the traditional/indigenous culture in the face of invasion of an alien culture marked by modernity and globalization coupled with the gross misrepresentation of the heterogeneous character of the region under the erroneous homogeneous

'Northeast' label further adds to the woes of this region. It is only natural hence that most of the literature emanating from this region carries a deep-rooted concern for the social issues that plague these areas. Temsula Ao, from Nagaland, is one such accomplished writer who strives to bring about a social change in her region by creating awareness about all the issues mentioned above. (2017: 113)

To Tilottoma Misra, (2010) literature from the Northeast India depicts "perceptions of the traumatic experience of a people living in the midst of terror and fear and yet cherishing hopes that human values will triumph some day and new dawn of peace would emerge out of this trial" (xix). Thus, scholars are of the view that the region suffers from a severe identity crisis which can be attributed to the "redrawing of boundaries that began with the Partition of the Subcontinent" (Misra, 2010: xvii). Elaborating a bit further, Rakhee Kalita (2008) notes:

The story of these people is the story of history's accidents, of an arbitrary line drawing boundaries across geographically and culturally contiguous lands dismembering the natural and inevitable growth and movement of a community – a consequence of colonial ambitions, political battles and failed bureaucratic strategies. (17)

Thus, the feeling of alienation elucidated in the above scholarly contributions generated the sense of victimhood perpetrated by the 'State', hence insurgency is more or less a desperate attempt to ruffled the India state as well as draw the attention of the international community to the ongoing subjugation and repression which have subsisted for decades. To Ved Prakash (2008), the insurgency in India's Northeast is "an ethno-cultural phenomenon, in the sense that perceiving their ethnic identity threatened, they seek political power to preserve it" (33). Just as most scholarly contributions analyzing the conflict in Northeast India blame marginalization of the people by the central government through repressive policies and forceful reliance on military might to repress, Grace Pelly (2009) observes that the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which empowers the military to deal ruthlessly with the insurgents, apparently have not helped. In explaining this, she states:

The rationale for AFSPA is that the armed forces need 'special powers' to prevent terrorist activity in the region and to contain independence movements. In practice, however, the police and the military forces use the powers and immunity that AFSPA grants to deal with ordinary matters of criminal justice. This highlights that increased powers given to State actors results in increased violence against civilians, fuelling a mutual distrust. (Pelly, 2009: 124)

In an attempt to summarize the variables that instigate crisis and agony in Northeast India, Neeraj Sankhyan and Suman Sigroha (2017) observe:

The insurgency and violence coupled with the endangering of the traditional/indigenous culture in the face of invasion by an alien culture marked by modernity and globalization, coupled with the gross misrepresentation of the heterogeneous character of the region under the erroneous homogeneous 'Northeast' label further adds to the woes of this region. (114)

According to Champa Chettri (2019) "the distinctive feature of North-Eastern state is its poetry and their uniqueness lies in the true representation of contemporary events and problems like ecological degradation, corruption, loss of identity and cultural values, conflict, migration and

violence" (23). Thus, Temsula Ao in her poems represents "Ao's myth, folklore, tradition and culture to comprehend the present cultural degradation, identity crisis and conflict" (Chettri, 2019: 175). For instance, in *Book of Songs*, Ao's poems encapsulate her position on the recovery of history, environmental degradation and the people's melancholy. Furthermore, this collection portrays Ao's firm courage of conviction, and her deep compassion, her desire to recover the past and work towards a peaceful future of progressive togetherness. Consequently, being a prominent voice from her Ao community, Ao uses her poetry to let the entire world be aware of her people's history, subsisting realities and needs. Espousing more on her poems' source material, Chettri (2019) notes that Ao's "poetry is motivated by her real-life experiences" (229). In many ways, being a firsthand witness makes Ao's poetry reflect dense emotions and empathy. Therefore, Chettri (2019) suggests that Ao's choice of language subsumes:

Her immense desire to delve deeper into the history of her community and revive her fast-decaying tribal culture can be seen in her poetry. Ao tries to capture the changing times, and many aspects of her culture. She has raised her voice against the ominous prospect of losing her long cherished and revered culture tradition and folklore. (229).

Still on Ao's projection of empathic emotions in her poems, Neeraj Sankhyan and Suman Sigroha (2016), observe that Ao's poem "My Hills" in many ways laments the lost of peace and verdure in her region, and that she depicts a sense of loss and nostalgia, as well as quest for the regeneration of their glorious past (117). Thus, in the poem "My Hills" "she reflects upon a sense of alienation that haunts her in the present and a longing for the bygone days" by portraying "natural imagery to depict the once paradise like state that prevailed in the region" (Sankhyan and Sigroha, 2016: 117).

Niger Delta, South-South Nigeria

In his book titled the *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*, Ojaide (1995), notes that what informed eco-poetry in Africa and in particular Nigeria is the "senseless destruction of our original neighbours, the trees and animals" (16). In essence, Ojaide's poetry represents emotion laden lamentation aimed at creating more awareness regarding the wanton destruction of eco-heritage by exploitative governments and the oil multinationals. Thus, Ojaide's poem "Delta Blues" is one way of looking at the Niger Delta people's response to oil exploration in their domain, which has had an adverse impact on their eco-heritage and livelihood. In line with the reports of Awosika (1995) and Ukiwo (2009), "the Niger Delta, located on the Atlantic coast of southern Nigeria is the world's third-largest wetland" which "occupies a total land area of 75,000 square kilometres" and "is the world's second largest delta with a coastline of about 450 km" (in Nwaozuzu *et al*/2020). According to Judith Burdin Asuni (2009), "the Niger Delta consists of six or nine oil-producing states in southern Nigeria, depending on one's geopolitical definition" and "the Niger Delta is home to about 140 ethnic groups in the nine states included in a broader definition of the region" (3). As of December 2021, Niger Delta is composed of 9 out of 36 states in Nigeria, (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Imo and Rivers), and it has 185 out of 774 local government areas (see Nwaozuzu *et al*/2020). As documented by Nwilo and Badejo (2006), "the strategic politico-economic importance of Niger Delta revolves around the fact that nearly all of Nigeria's proven oil and gas reserves and a total of 159 oil fields and 1481 wells in operation are located in the region" (Nwaozuzu *et al*/2020). As documented by Nwilo and Badejo, (2006), the

“total production from Nigeria’s oil fields in Niger Delta region increased from 308 million barrels in 1970 to 703,455 million barrels in 1991 and production peaked in 1980s when the total output was 753.5 million barrels per annum, out of which 93% was exported overseas” (Nwaozuzu *et al*/2020). Furthermore, “though the GDP ratio contribution of oil and gas dropped significantly from average of 37% to 40% achieved in 1980s, 1990s and beyond, to an average of 12% in 2000s, it has delivered from the 1970s to 2019 more than 70% of foreign exchange for Nigeria” (Nwaozuzu *et al*/2020). Consequently, between 2000 and 2004, oil and gas accounted for 75% of total government revenues, and 97% of foreign exchange earnings (Ukiwo, 2009). In the face of the clear evidence that Nigeria depends heavily on the crude oil extracted from the Niger Delta to obtain foreign exchange, Asuni (2009) observes that the conflict in the Niger Delta revolves around the fact that:

The oil industry exploited and polluted the area, wiping out the traditional livelihoods of fishing and farming and providing few jobs or benefits in return. Despite its mineral wealth, the Niger Delta is one of the poorest regions in Nigeria. There is no infrastructure to speak of and the inhospitable geography of the region has added to the region’s remoteness from the rest of the country. (3)

Thus, the dismay and anger portrayed by a poet such as Tanure Ojaide in his poems are hinged on the projection that “Nigeria has drawn more than \$400 billion in oil revenues from the delta since independence, around \$200 billion in the last decade alone” (Asuni, 2009: 5). Elaborating, Asuni acknowledges that though “statistics are unreliable” to some extent, however, “there is consensus that around 51 per-cent of the Niger Delta’s people still live on \$2 or less a day, only 49 percent have access to safe drinking water, there is one secondary school for every 14,679 children, and one child in five dies before his/her fifth birthday” (Asuni, 2009: 5). It is the clear lack of desire or will to plough back substantial resources to the Niger Delta for purposes of development and environment management and conservation are the major reasons given by the Niger Delta freedom fighters, in response to the enormous outcry from Niger Delta people. In response, eco-poets such as Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Nnimmo Bassey, Christopher Okigbo, and Ken Saro-Wiwa have applied their poems to publicize and challenge the environmental degradation, injustice in social projects allocation, and the capitalistic practices of the oil multinationals. These poets, project the oil multinationals as those whose exploration has led to the destruction of eco-heritage in Niger Delta, while they blame the government for doing very little to turn around the destruction of the Niger Delta environment. These woes sum up the horrendous inhumanity that is going on for decades (see Ali, 2017). Espousing, Ali (2017) observes that eco-poets of Nigerian extraction such Tanure Ojaide apply their poetry to “celebrate nature’s beauty and potentials” as well as to “chastise exploitative activities of man” and at the same time “urge moral and social change in favour of the natural environment” (1). Furthermore, Ali (2017) notes that most “poets’ particular environments influence the form and style of their poetry”, hence, “there are more environmental challenges in the contemporary world of Tanure Ojaide which his poetry reflects” (1).

In his description of the trajectories of inclinations in Ojaide’s poetry, Uzoechi Nwagbara (2010) observes that “Ojaide’s poetic enterprise follows in the footsteps of this mould of interdiction, which can be called resistance poetics” (17), which are defined by the language nuances. Thus,

Ojaide's collections of poems, *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants* are examples of eco-critical literature in which he variously relays his worldview and quest. Which are "to use literature to engage the realities in his milieu" because "for him, literature is a reproduction of social experiences" and "refraction of the totality of human experience" (Nwagbara, 2010: 18). In his explanation of what constitutes Ojaide's milieu realities, Inya Eteng (1997) notes:

What currently prevails in the Southern oil enclave is a specific variant of internal colonialism [...]. The specific highly exploitative and grossly inequitable endowment/ownership-exchange entitlements relations between the Nigerian state and the oil-bearing communities in particular, which explains why the enormous oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard and life chances of the peasant inhabitants of the oil-bearing enclave. (21)

Thus, Ojaide uses his poems to highlight the exploitative environmental policies that have allowed the ongoing degradation of the Niger Delta eco-heritage. Thus, "with the emergence of eco-criticism, Ojaide's writings have come to be considered environmentally conscious texts because they show a serious connection with the natural world as well as foreground how man's activities affect his environment and ecology" (Nwagbara, 2010: 18). Similarly, Darah (2009) observes that the poetry of Ojaide "fits into the tradition of outrage against political injustice, exploitation, and environmental disasters" (12). Furthermore, Darah (2009) contends that "on the basis of sheer output, Ojaide is the most prolific in the Niger Delta region" and that "from his titles, one can discern an abiding concern with the fate of the Niger Delta people" (12). Some of Ojaide's collections of poems include; *Waiting for the Hatching of the Cockerel* (2008), *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* (1998), *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998), *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* (1997), *The Blood of Peace and Other Poems* (1991), and *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986). Ojaide besides being a celebrated prolific poet, is a scholar critic, activist, nationalist, cultural entrepreneur and novelist.

Despoil, Pains, and Disenchantment in Ao's Eco-poetics

The eco-poetics of Ao and Ojaide in many ways portray the feeling of nostalgia, melancholy and disenchantment as they recollect the breath-taking splendour, and allure their eco-heritages represented before their degradation. Both poets similarly lament the wanton destruction of their natural environment brought about by deplorable human actions. In Ao's Nagaland, it is the case of the long-drawn violent conflict between the Indian military and Nagaland freedom fighters. In Ojaide's Niger Delta, it is the issue of deplorable oil exploration practices leading to consistent oil spillages, massive gas flaring leading to loss of livelihood (farming and fishing), and the ravaging armed insurgency. Ao in her poem "My Hills" (2013) interrogates the negative impact of exclusion and discrimination experienced by the marginalized Nagaland tribes which have substituted peace and prosperity with violence, trauma, pain and anger.

She laments the impact of violence on the eco-heritage, represented metaphorically as 'hills' in the poem's title "My Hills". She attempts to present to reader through this poem how the long drawn war in Nagaland has created melancholy, anger and sadness. She also presents a nostalgic feeling in her recollection of the serenity, peace and splendour her natural environment represented. Beginning with a melancholic mood, she writes:

The Sounds and Sights
Have altered
In my hills
Once they hummed
With bird-song
And happy gurgling brooks
Like running silver

With shoals of many fish (line 1 – 8) (Ao, 2013: 157 – 158)

In lines 1 to 3, Ao laments the negative changes in her people's cultural activities (music and songs), and natural rhythms (from trees and animals) which she referred to as 'sounds'. The expression 'sights' include (the topography and festivities) which are adversely altered because of degradation propelled by the ravaging war. The expression 'in my hills' indicates Ao's affinity, affiliation, fondness, empathy and identification with Nagaland which is her ancestral home. In lines 4 to 8, Ao reminisces by painting a picture that represents what the natural habitat – her hills — was before the degradation she refers to as alteration in line 2 began. In line 4, Ao applies personification by suggesting that the hills —the entire landscape — were exuding scintillating melody. The expression 'birdsong' in line 5, 'happy gurgling brooks' in line 6, and 'shoals of many fish' in line 8, are imageries and metaphors Ao utilized to suggest a naturally existing serene, peaceful and healthy ecosystem before the catastrophic alteration. These memories captured in line 4 to line 8 represent the realities of the pre-war era in Nagaland. In these lines (4 to 8) Ao presents to the readers who did not witness Nagaland's eco-heritage before despoil, the healthy and beautiful reality it was, which will help them to appreciate better why she is melancholic with the subsisting reality. Still reminiscing, she writes:

The trees were many
Happy, verdant green
The seasons playing magic
On their many-splendored sheen
When summer went
The hills echoed
With the wistful whispers
Of autumnal leaves
Fluttering to their fall

In the winter-smelling breeze (line 9 – 18) (Ao, 2013: 157 – 158)

From line 9 to line 12, Ao indicates that the 'flora' in the region were lush, beautiful and healthy. From line 13 to line 18 Ao speaks about the climatic condition and weather of the region, which she presented as healthy with beautiful features. Again, in these lines (9 to 18) Ao spent significant

time attempting to recollect, as a means of letting her readers see what avoidable actions have denied humanity. Then, in the following lines, she halted her beautiful memories and transited abruptly to replicate the solemn mood which subsumes the pain and despoil war has brought to her and her people:

But today

I no longer know my hills,

The birdsong is gone,

Replaced by the staccato

Of sophisticated weaponry (line 19 – 23) (Ao, 2013: 157 – 158)

Then, from line 19 to line 23, Ao bemoans the catastrophic alteration that has taken place in her war-torn region. In line 19, Ao's words 'but today' though literal means subsisting, however connotes the metaphor of when the catastrophic alteration actually began. Ao's expression 'I no longer know my hills' in line 20 deftly encapsulates and summarizes her point-of-view. The above expression is a poignant conclusion laden with varied emotion and attributions. An attribution is that the expression suggests that she saw, dwelled and experienced 'sounds' and 'sights', emanating from the 'fauna', 'flora' and 'ecosystem' in the time of healthy and alluring habitat of Nagaland. In line 21, Ao bewails the loss of peacefulness and allure which the metaphor 'birdsong is gone' denotes. Thus, as at the period of publishing the poem "My Hills" the period of negative alteration characterized by a disturbing, dangerous, and destructive sounds of weapons of war emanating from the barrels of the Indian military and the insurgents (the freedom fighters) subsists. Still painting the picture of despoil, Ao bemoans:

The rivers are running red

The hillsides are bare

And the seasons have lost

Their magic

Because the very essence

Of my hills

Are lost

Forever (line 24 – 31) "My Hills" *Book of Songs* (Ao 2013: 157 – 158)

In lines 24 and 25, Ao laments the alteration that the war has dealt with 'flora', ecology, environment, and water sources. In line 24 the expression 'the rivers are running red' is a metaphor bewailing the spilling of human blood as a result of the war. In line 25, she statement; 'the hillsides are bare' moans about the massive negative effects the long draw war has brought upon the environment and ecology health. From line 26 to line 31, Ao observes that the beautiful 'sights' which the dwellers and tourists enjoyed are catastrophically altered, again because of the avoidable war. Thus, what remains are charred trees and agonizingly depleted wildlife in ravaged ecosystem and habitat. Thus, some of the animals have been driven off the region or are under extinction hence the beautiful and scintillating 'sounds' they produce are either diminishing or

some gone. Also, the movement of heavy military equipments and explosion of bombs contribute towards the distressing degradation. Thus, the seasons though continue to come and gone as usual in the region, their allure and positive effect on topography and ecosystem are rapidly diminishing or barely evident. Clearly, line 27 to line 31, are filled with Ao's sad emotions which are laden with discomfiture, disenchantment, melancholy and deprivation. Through this approach, Ao succeeds in presenting the seriousness of the issue at hand, which indicates her deployment of poetry as a powerful weapon of subversion, protest, conscience aggregation and advocacy.

In the essay titled 'Terror Tales: The Naga Insurgency in the Writings of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire', Prajna Paramita Ray (2016) observes that Ao uses writings to publicise the "traumatic experiences of common Naga people living in the midst of violence" (58). Poignantly, Debashree Dattaray notes that "poets such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Cherrie L. Chhangte have vociferously critiqued neo-imperialist assumptions of indigenous identity, refusing to be labelled within so-called mainstream literary traditions of criticism" (2015: 37), and Prajna concludes that Ao's poems "successfully reconstructs and problematizes the historicity of Naga insurgency by weaving together polysemic voices of authority and dissent" (2016: 66).

Despoil, Pains, and Disenchantment in Ojaide Eco-poetics

Just as studies on Ao's eco-poetics on Nagaland suggest, scholarship on Ojaide's [2] eco-poetry, provides similar illumination on the economic, socio-political and cultural implications of eco-degradation in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, South-South Nigeria, as well as the trope of eco-alienation (see Abba and Onyemachi 2020). The overview of Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* as presented in the collection's blurb, indicates that this collection of poems "is a poetic diatribe against the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta and the unjust system which makes the people to be chief mourners and paupers in the midst of their oil wealth" (1998: blurb). Ojaide's poems majorly revolve around "the feeling of disconnect between the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region and the oil wealth in their community" (Abba & Onyemachi, 2020: 1). Thus, Ojaide's poetry "demonstrate that the Niger Delta indigenes, as a result, have been compelled to perceive the oil environment no longer as a source of improved life but as a metaphor for death" (Abba & Onyemachi, 2020: 1). Furthermore, Ojaide through his poems portray how the oil-rich region is perceived as an endangered environment because "oil exploration destroys the environment and reduces the opportunity for human survival" (Okuyade, 2013: 75).

"Delta Blues", like most of Ojaide's poems provides a deep and dense account regarding the deplorable human actions against Niger Delta eco-heritage and the inhabitants. In "Delta Blues", Ojaide laments the monumental inhumanity which is driven by greed and selfishness subsumed in ultra capitalist penchant and worldview. In the first seven lines in "Delta Blues" Ojaide lets the reader feel his affinity, the context of despoil, the factors responsible for the existing despoil, the world's apparent disinterest regarding the continuing degradation of eco-resources and heritage in Niger Delta. In the beginning line, Ojaide starts with recollection of warm memories as he states:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,
Reels from an immeasurable wound.
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow

From this hurt to the unquestioning world

That lights up its life in a blind trust.

The inheritance I sat on for centuries

Now crushes my body and soul . . . (line 1 – 7) (“Delta Blues” Ojaide, 1998: 21)

In line 1 Ojaide reminisces about the serenity, beauty and health of the Niger Delta natural environment, just as Ao speaks about her experiences of Nagaland before the beginning of its degradation, which are the good memories. However, in line 2, he sadly bemoans metaphorically, the monumental destruction of Niger Delta eco-heritage. And in line 3, he blames ‘crude oil’ exploration, results in massive spillages that contaminate the mangrove forests, rivers, creeks and farms. In line 4, he refers to the ‘oil’ buying countries as ‘selfish’ and ‘sanctimonious’ because all they care about is the consistent flow of oil regardless of the immense inhuman consequence that has become the reality of the Niger Delta inhabitants for decades. In line 6, he alludes to concept of eco-heritage as he indicates that the natural environment and all that are found therein are inheritance. Furthering, exuding his disenchantment, he sadly narrates:

My nativity gives immortal pain

Masked in barrels of oil

Stew in the womb of fortune.

I live in the deathbed

Prepared by a cabal of brokers

Breaking the peace of centuries

And tainting not only a thousand rivers,

My lifeblood from the beginning,

But scorching their sacred soil was debauched

By prospectors, money-monger?

My birds take flight to the sea,

And animals grope in the burning bush (line 8 – 19) (Ojaide, “Delta Blues” 1998: 21)

From line 8 to line 19, Ojaide attempts to elaborate deeply his repulsion as he touches on how ‘oil’ which supposedly should be ‘blessing’ has turned to a propelling factor and curse behind the despoil metaphorically. Also, in these lines, he points and elaborates on the culprits, the magnitude and consequences of their deplorable actions, the victimhood consciousness and bitterness of the Niger Delta inhabitants, and the scary future which this generation will leave behind. In line 10, he describes the massive oil reserve as fortune, however in line 11; he deplores the precarious situation he (as the metaphoric representation of Niger Delta) dwells in. Essentially, because he speaks about a shared reality which he unambiguously emphasized in line 1 ‘this shared paradise’, he is supposedly using the expression in line 11 ‘I live in the deathbed’ to suggest his affinity and involvement, even though his feelings and experiences are common to Niger Delta Inhabitants. In line 12, he indicts the individuals, proxies and government agencies responsible for

the oil commerce, as those behind the destruction of the health of the eco-heritage through their actions and inactions in line 13. In line 14, he poignantly points at what oil exploration has done to the nature resources using contaminated waters and land as clear illustrations. He bemoaned this reality because the waters and land are the sources of livelihood for the Niger Delta people who are mostly farmers and fishers in lines 15 and 16. In line 17, he describes the individuals in oil exploration in Niger Delta as self-centred capitalists. Thus, in lines 18 and 19, he laments the loss of fishes to contaminated waters and wildlife because of the relentless destruction of their habitat. Clearly, Ojaide's words and comments in line 8 to line 19, subsumes melancholic disenchantment and anguish, which will propel the reader to appreciate the extent of nature resources destruction as a means of encouraging positive consciousness and better behaviour towards environment regeneration and conservation.

Conclusion

The eco-poetics of Ao and Ojaide portray the deplorable avoidable actions of people, the disinterest in conservation of natural environment in Niger Delta and Nagaland which have altered the eco-heritage in both regions adversely. The poems "My Hills" and "Delta Blues" portray dense poetic consciousness propelled by the poets' love and affinity towards their eco-heritages. Though both poets employed relevant poetic devices and metaphorical nuances, such inclusions did not create ambiguity; hence in both poems the uses of language are fairly understandable depending on the awareness of the readers. Clearly, both poems serve the purpose of creating awareness to the global community, as a means of drawing attention to the destruction of the eco-heritage in Nagaland and Niger Delta. Consequently, both poems are advocacy texts, variously deploring the wanton destruction of natural habitat and eco-heritage. Also, both poets in the opening lines of their poems suggest unambiguous empathy and connection to the plight of the locals in their poems. More, so both poets observe that before the massive despoil in Nagaland and Niger Delta, both regions once had healthy and beautiful environments. Similarly, both poets singled out deplorable human actions as the reason behind the monumental degradation of their eco-heritage. They also presented their lamentations to accommodate locale specific realities even though their projection of their eco-heritage degradation reflects very similar consequences, such as possible extinction of some 'flora' and 'fauna', long lasting contamination rivers, streams, and lakes, and irredeemable defacing and degradation of once beautiful topography. Succinctly, both Ojaide and Ao deplore the apparent reality of disinterest by the global community who appear distant, lukewarm, or oblivious of the pain, agony and turmoil in the Niger Delta and Nagaland regions. Lastly, both poets suggest that the subsisting behaviours will continue to harm the environment; hence they have to stop for meaningful regeneration to commence.

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^[1]Temsula Ao, born in 1945 is a renowned writer, a poet, an academician, a recipient of numerous awards, is one of the most celebrated women writers of North-East India. Her prominent works include two collections of short stories titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (2005), *Laburnum for my Head* (2009), *Aosenla's Story* (2017) and an essay called *Henry James Quest for the Ideal Heroine* (1989). Her poetry collections are *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here & There* (2003), *Songs from the other Life* (2007), *Book of Songs* (2013), and *Songs along the Way Home* (2017). Her other prominent works include *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition* (2012), *Once upon a Life: Burnt Curry & Bloody Rags, A Memoir* (2014) and *On Being a Naga: Book of Essays* (2014) (see Chettri 2019; Dattaray, 2015).

^[2]Prominent among Ojaide's poems are *The Questioner* (2018), *Songs of Myself: A Quartet* (2015), *Love Gifts* (2013), *The Beauty I Have Seen* (2010), *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008), *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), *In the House of Words* (2005), *I Want to Dance and Other Poems* (2003), *In the Kingdom of Songs* (2002), *Invoking the Warrior Spirit: New and Selected Poems* (2000), *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* (1999), *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* (1999), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998), *Daydream of Ants* (1997), *The Blood of Peace* (1991), *The Fate of Vultures* (1990), *Poems* (1988), *The Endless Song* (1988), *The Eagle's Vision* (1987), *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *Children of Iroko and Other Poems* (1973).

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