

A Cultural Semiotic Reading of Protest Motif in Tanure Ojaide's Eco-poetry

Adeyemi ADEGOJU

Department of English
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

and

Smart O. OLUGBEKO

Department of Curriculum Studies
Federal College of Education (T)
Akoka, Lagos

Abstract

Tanure Ojaide's commitment to resisting the alarming environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is evidenced in the protest motif that runs through his eco-poetry. Thus, this article examines the polemics of ecoactivism in Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself: Quartet* and *The Tale of the Harmattan*. It purposively sampled some poems from the poetry collections, considering their representation of the magnitude of the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region and its devastating consequences on the natural world inhabited by both human and non-human beings. The article adopts Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics theory, drawing insights from its concept of semiosphere and the principle of dialogism. The analysis reveals that the semiotic resources in the eco-poetry largely reflect the unique cultural-cum-historical continuum of the interconnectivity of nature and culture in the Niger Delta world. The study concludes that the polemics of ecoactivism in the poems typifies the confrontational tone and combative spirit associated with protest literature.

Keywords: Cultural semiotics, ecoactivism, nature, Niger Delta, protest motif

Introduction

Over the years, there has been a proliferation of creative works which have imaginatively interrogated the environmental condition of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. This form of regional literature known as Niger Delta literature embodies works which are either set in the Niger Delta or take their themes from the bitter experiences of the people of the region (Ojaide, 2015). Ohagwam (2018) avers that issues of resource control, unemployment, infrastructural decay, and youth restiveness are some of the preoccupations of writers in Niger Delta literature. According to Ojaruega (2022), writers who have been committed to the Niger Delta cause in their literary works have been at the forefront of an intellectual form of ecoactivism, using their fiction, poetry, and plays to interrogate the plight of this region. Against this backdrop, Maledo and Edhere (2021) argue that this form of regional literature is characterised by its confrontational tone, exhibiting a combative spirit associated with the literature of protest.

Agofure (2019) notes that contemporary Nigerian poetry collections act as a medium of eco-communication and resistance to globalisation in addressing issues of industrialisation and how they negatively impact on the environment. Thus, besides being a depiction of the land and its people, Niger Delta eco-poetry, which is a vibrant strand of Niger Delta literature, is more

importantly an advocacy for human and environmental justice (Egya, 2016). Niger Delta eco-poetry is typified by a kind of artistic temper which Okuyade (2017) refers to as poetic protest. According to Egya (2016), citing Nixon (2011, p. 15), Niger Delta eco-poetry is better viewed as a cultural struggle by writer-activists who “can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses”. Writing further on the protest motif in Niger Delta eco-poetry, Egya (2016) stresses that poets from the Niger Delta region consider themselves as literary militants who engage in what might be referred to as a poetics of activism to combat institutional powers that inflict slow violence on the biotic community. Summing up the nexus between poetry and eco-activism in the Niger Delta literature, Egya (2016, p. 11) argues that for poets from the Niger Delta region, “the act of writing poetry itself is, for the more radical poets, a form of activism – in fact in the same sense that the militants, as many of them argue, struggle for the liberation of the region.”

Egya (2020) explains that beyond describing the physical environment or the landscape, the strand of environmental writing which pushes the boundary towards activism lays emphasis on deploying literature for eco-activism to the extent that the writer could be viewed as militant. However, it is noteworthy that the notion of eco-activism is mainly textual, as attention is focused on characters' activism in the texts, not necessarily the authors' (Egya, 2020). Thus, with the environmental turn in Nigerian literature in English, Egya et al. (2022) note that poetry acquires more instrumental force and becomes more deeply rooted in protest aesthetics, a phenomenon that has been depicted as literary militancy. In this sense, Egya et al. (2022, p. 2) observe that “[...] writers have tended to be more militant, and energise their art more pointedly in order to seek human and environmental justice” in a bid to advocate the rights of human and non-human beings. Poetry, to such radical poets, becomes a powerful instrument for conveying resistance by historicising the condition of the people and their lands and also raising a counter-narrative in confrontation against powerful agencies and the collaborators in government.

It is within this protestant literary tradition that we locate Tanure Ojaide's eco-poetry in this study. Ayinde (2019) posits that Ojaide is a writer well known for his militant social vision about environmental discourse in the Niger Delta. Also, Nwagbara (2010, p. 19) observes that “Ojaide's activist artistic enterprise finds ample expression in using poetry for resistance dialectics, which culminates in environmentalism and cultural reaffirmation.” The thrust of resistance dialectics in this form of poetry highlights writers' sensitivity to the plight of biodiversity loss. For the authors' works “transcend mere aesthetics to pursue a political goal, namely the inauguration of a counter-

discourse, through discursive historicism, that openly resists the tendentious development narratives of the federal government and the oil organisations” (Egya, 2021, p. 190). To Eukora (2020), the type of ecoactivism which Ojaide engages revolves around political action whereby he encapsulates environmental issues in an overt committed manner not only to tackle cases of human rights abuse and environmental degradation but also to sensitise the public to imbibe a more positive approach in handling the earth.

Ojaide's ecological vision in his eco-poetry resonates with what Rueckert (1996, p. 107) explains as what most ecologists agree as the task to tackle “the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature”. The present study, therefore, attempts to semiotically read some selected poems in Tanure Ojaide's poetry collections *Songs of Myself: Quartet* (2015) and *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2015). The goal of the study is to explore the poet's deployment of the tools of cultural semiotics to give vent to the protest motif in his eco-poetry, as he bemoans the state of environmental injustice in the land and resists the human agents who exhibit ecologically destructive behaviour towards the environment.

Statement of Research Problem

From a linguistic-stylistic orientation, several scholars have focused on Ojaide's poetic art in line with his appropriation of the resources of language in his eco-poetry. Ibhawagbele and Omo-Ojugo (2010) analyse stylistic devices in Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems*. Edem (2016) attempts a stylistic analysis of Tanure Ojaide's *The Endless Song* (1989) and *The Beauty I Have Seen: A Trilogy* (2010). Inegbe (2018) adopts stylistic tools to analyse selected poems in Tanure Ojaide's *The Endless Song*. Maledo (2019) analyses graphological features in Tanure Ojaide's selected poems. Kadiri et al. (2022) attempt a stylistic study of selected poems in *Fate of the Vultures and other Poems* by applying critical stylistic tools to examine social and ideological meanings inherent in the analysed poems. Emama (2020) analyses the cohesive devices in Ojaide's folklore-inspired poetry, applying Halliday and Hasan's theory of cohesion. The style and themes of Tanure Ojaide with those of another notable Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare have also been compared by literary critics, using the tools of ecocriticism (Alabi, 2021). In a similar vein, Ojaide's style and themes have been compared with those of Ebi Yeibo, an emerging voice in Niger Delta poetry tradition (Abonyi, 2022). Ojaide's aestheticisation of orality which is a significant literary technique in his writing has been investigated by some scholars who are preoccupied with

his appropriation of Urhobo folklore through local images and symbols as deeply rooted in nature (Okuyade, 2012; Ojaruega, 2015; Egya, 2018; Usanga, 2018).

With specific reference to the two collections the present study analyses, Orhero (2017) investigates aspects of Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics in negotiating cultural and ethnic identity in *Songs of Myself*, while Abonyi (2022) applies the theory of ecofeminism to analyse the same poetry collection. Onyema and Onyema (2015) analyse the lexical entries in *The Tale of the Harmattan* to express some special aspects of the people's ecological experiences, while Okoro (2018) explores the themes and the historical, cultural, and political contexts of his poetry in the same collection. *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2015) and another poetry collection *Delta Blues* (2007) have also been analysed with a view to unpacking Ojaide's ecocritical consciousness in interrogating environmental degradation in the Niger Delta (Oge-Chimezie, 2018; Akani, 2021). These studies, particularly the ones which apply literary-critical perspectives to reading his poetry generally unpack varied motifs which show Ojaide's commitment to using the instrumentality of his poetic art to interrogate the lived experiences of his people in the Niger Delta world. The ones which engage the tools of linguistic-stylistics analyse his creative use of language to relate his messages to his readers and also underline his unique style of injecting indigenous African poetic tradition into his poetics. However, scholars have not paid adequate attention to interrogating the polemics of resisting agents of environmental despoliation by applying the tools of cultural semiotics. It is this lacuna that the present study intends to address.

Methodology

Following the goal of this study to apply cultural semiotic tools to interrogate the protest motif which straddles the two poetry collections – *Songs of Myself: Quartet* (2015) and *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2015) – selected for critical reading in this study, we purposively sampled poems in which the poet-persona reflects on the magnitude of environmental degradation and its devastating consequences on the natural world. In all, we sampled six poems from *Songs of Myself: Quartet* (2015). The poems are: “The multitude of fish”, “At Eruemukohwarien”, “I had left home with reluctance”, “Only in his memory”, “If I were to ask my people”, and “I pass the same roads”. Six other poems were sampled from *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2015). They are: “Transplants”, “The goat song”, “Quatrain suite”, “At the Kaiama Bridge”, “The mass hunt” and “To the janjaweed”. A descriptive method of analysis is adopted in the study to semiotically read the poems while applying

relevant aspects of the theoretical framework to unpack Ojaide's environmental consciousness, his ecoactivist posture and the polemics of waging an ideological war against agents of environmental despoliation in the Niger Delta.

Theoretical Perspective

Given Sonesson's (2001) view that nature and culture are the two defining terms of the semiotics of culture as first conceived by the Moscow-Tartu school, this study adopts Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics theory to tease out the sign systems deployed in the polemics of Tanure Ojaide's ecoactivism. Posner (2005, p. 308) cited in Salupere and Torop (2013, p. 18) posits that cultural semiotics as a sub-discipline of semiotics with culture as its subject has two tasks: (i) The study of sign systems in a culture with respect to what they contribute to the culture, and (ii) the study of cultures as sign systems with respect to the advantages and disadvantages which an individual experiences in belonging to a specific culture. From the point of view of semiotics, everything which is in any way associated with meaning, in fact, belongs to culture and natural language is the central operator of culture (Zylko, 2001). For the Moscow-Tartu circle, therefore, natural language is taken to be a primary modelling system which contains a general picture of the world. For Lotman, therefore, the main question of semiotics of culture is the problem of meaning generation and that is the task we seek to undertake in semiotically reading Tanure Ojaide's protest motif in his eco-poetry.

In describing the products of culture, Lotman adopts three terms: model, structure and sign. The example of the literary text as "a specific model" (Zylko, 2001, p. 395) as conceived by Lotman means that the literary work correlates with the reality beyond it and reconstructs the external world in a way specific to itself different to other types of models like scientific ones. With regard to structure, Lotman explains that the (literary) artistic creation is made of something material – language – and is internally organised. Finally, the artistic creation is in itself also a sign which participates in communication between its author and the reader, and enters into relationships with the reader's world and ethical system. Against this backdrop, we consider Tanure Ojaide's eco-poetry as a literary model which reconstructs the external world of reality in the Niger Delta region in a specific way – an advocacy for human and environmental justice – different to scientific models on the environmental degradation in the region. His poetic discourse also has a structure in terms of the language and style deployed in his protest motif. Lastly, his eco-poetry is in itself a sign that encapsulates his poetic consciousness which resonates with the present readers' world and ethical system.

It is instructive that Lotman's configuration of sign fits in with his concept of semiosphere, which is central to his cultural semiotics. Lotman's model of culture as a semiotic space is embodied in his seminal essay "On Semiosphere" (1984) and his later book *Universe of Mind* (1990). Lotman's notion of the semiosphere refers to the semiotic environment in which communication occurs and from which it derives its codes. The semiosphere, according to Lotman (1990, p. 123), is "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages", a space in which we are immersed whenever we speak or communicate and which has "prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages". For Lotman (1984), the semiosphere is a semiotic space, outside which semiosis cannot exist. As such, it puts constraints on the semiotic activity of people by providing specific textual resources for meaning making. It is these textual resources for meaning making that we will attempt to unpack in semiotically reading the selected poems from Tanure Ojaide's ecopoetry collections. Within this orientation, semiosphere includes all semiotic acts past and present and possesses a "memory which transforms the history of the system into its actually functioning mechanism [...] the mass of texts ever created and [...] the programme for generating future texts" (Lotman & Uspensky, 1984, p. xii).

Nöth (2015) explains that in contrast to Lotman's earlier writings influenced by information theory and Saussurean structuralism, his new model of culture as a semiosphere represents clearly a poststructuralist position. Torop (2005) argues that one of Lotman's methodological principles on which also his own treatment of semiosphere is based is the principle of dialogism. The semioticians of the Moscow-Tartu school put the Bakhtinian concept of dialogicality at the centre. They argue that cultural conventions are historically disrupted in a dialogical communication with the Other. According to Laas (2016, p. 469), "[t]he notion of dialogue is foundational for both Juri Lotman and Mikhail Bakhtin. For Lotman, dialogue is an ontological characteristic of the semiosphere, and the ground for all meaning-making processes therein." In this sense, messages are embedded in a fluid semiotic environment from which they draw their meaning rather than being structured in binary oppositions. To Lotman, culture is information and as such depends on human consciousness. For he stresses that "objects" of culture are both subjective and conscious in character (Zylko, 2001).

The dialogical encounters with difference lead to the emergence of new meanings and, consequently, to new unpredictable directions in cultural development. Hence, even though ecological issues may have global connections, they are largely localised and intrinsically interwoven with historical imaginaries, memory and cultural identity of the people. Américo (2017)

argues that semiosphere is not stable but, on the contrary, it is extremely dynamic. And since languages and cultural texts are constantly in dialogue, they multiply and fight for a central position. Consequently, the semiotic reading of the selected poems will be carried out in line with Long and He's (2021) view that the basic insight behind Lotman's concept of semiosphere is that the minimum functional mechanism is not a single symbol, a single text, or a single semiotic system. It is rather a complete semiotic space, whose internal organisation is created and maintained by multiple semiotic processes, occurring at different levels of a multifaceted, multilevel communicative system.

Analysis and Discussion

This section is divided into three main sub-sections in line with the protest motif which runs through the poems sampled for analysis.

Poetics of Bemoaning Depletion of Biodiversity in the Niger Delta World

The poet-persona decries the depletion of biodiversity in the ecosystem as opposed to the pristine world when nature was at its best. In the poem "The multitude of fish", he laments thus:

The day now wears soot over its broad face
and returns not with its cheerful presence.
The sun laments the loss of its bright dominion.

The moon can no longer brag about its bounty.
At night gas flares rob it of magnificence;
at no time can it exercise its rights in the dark.

The air sweats from uncontrolled fires and toxins;
the breeze no longer a fan but a blowing firebrand.
The air is reeling from the smoke-smothering rack.

A brutal picture of biodiversity loss is painted in the above lines with the poet-persona lamenting the degradation suffered by nature elements such as "the day", "the sun", "the moon", "the air" and

“the breeze”. The poet-persona’s lament of the respective devaluation suffered by these elements is metaphorically reconstructed by weaving an aura of grandeur and magnificence around them with the use of personified images of “broad face”, “cheerful presence” and “bright dominion”. These images describe their pristine state which regrettably has now been depleted. Reference to the semiotics of splendour in the adjectives “broad”, “cheerful” and “bright” which qualify the noun heads “face”, “presence” and “dominion” respectively is significant towards emphasising the inherent capacities of these elements not only to breathe life into other non-human elements but also to sustain the health and safety of human beings themselves in the ecosystem. Thus, these personified images invest the nature elements with right to life, existence, potential and influence, which regrettably human beings are insensitive to and have consequently suffocated.

It is instructive that the poet-persona draws the reader’s attention to the toxic substances which rob these natural elements of their essence with the use of the destructive signifiers “soot”, “gas flares” and “uncontrolled fires and toxins” which are anthropogenic instruments of visiting violence on the environment. Even with a little quantity of these chemical substances released into the biotic community, very lethal damage will be caused to the environment not to talk of a large quantity. So, the poet-persona decries the unmitigated human hostility to the environment with the use of the adjective “uncontrolled” to qualify the destructive signifier “fires and toxins” which ravage the ecosystem. Expectedly, the negative impact on the ecosystem can only be that of tales of woes and chaos caused the natural order. Hence, the grim picture of the horrendous repercussions on the natural order is captured in the strange collocates: “the breeze no longer a fan but a blowing firebrand. / The air is reeling from the smoke-smothering rack”. This picture signifies the palpable dislocation and resultant dysfunctionality and chaos attendant to the bio-invasion in the ecosystem.

A typical locale where the destructive human elements unleash terror on the ecosystem and where their dastardly activities of oil exploration strip the ecosystem of its magnificence is captured in the poem “At Eruemukohwarien”:

At Eruemukohwarien
designated Ughelli 1
bold on oilfield charts
but never on road maps

The locale “Eruemukohwarien” is an archetype of the numerous oilfields in the Niger Delta environment which are synonymous with generating oil revenue for the country but ironically

attracting little or no development to the immediate communities from the government and the multinationals. To this end, the poet-persona uses the antithetical structure “bold on oilfield charts / but never on road maps” in the third and fourth lines above respectively. Revealing the unecological activities of oil explorers, the poet-persona recounts:

with a phone camera
wriggling through the bush
onto a metal platform
I took close shots
of two gas flares
that have been burning
for fifty years and for sure
will go on for centuries
if the earth's not exhausted

What is semiotically striking in the lines above is the poet-persona's referencing of time as shown in the signifiers of tense and aspect markers (present perfect continuous “have been burning”) to intensify the sustained attack on the ecosystem by anthropogenic forces. Besides, the definitive temporal marker in the signifying element “fifty years” is semiotically significant. While the years of sustained attack on the ecosystem as shown in the signifiers may be worrisome, what is even more alarming is the apprehension/cynicism of the poet-persona on the perpetration of the evil into the distant future as expressed in the use of the modal auxiliary “will” in the future tense markers “will go on” and the *ad infinitum* temporal frame “for centuries”.

The poet-persona distressingly represents the ecological violations and how they have taken their toll on the agrarian community in the Niger Delta thus:

Beside the twin infernos
a wilted cassava farm
that cannot feed a child
and blackened earth denying
plants and creatures' life

It is noteworthy that the impending doom of food insecurity in the community depicted in these lines is underlined by the poet-persona's predilection for pre- and post-modifying elements in

nominal groups with the noun heads “cassava farm” and “earth”. While “cassava farm” is a cultural signifier which defines the identity of the people as an agrarian population predominantly relying on cassava as staple food for family sustenance, “earth” is a signifier for the supposed space for multiplication and replenishment of not only the human species but also non-human elements. Ironically, in the first nominal group, the adjective “wilted” is used as a signifier of the death of the agrarian life of the community, while the post-modifying signifier “that cannot feed a child” conveys the same sense of loss and attendant sterility of nature. In the second nominal group, the use of the signifier “blackened” to premodify the noun head “earth” and the post-modifying element “denying plants and creatures life” signifies the obliteration of biodiversity in the Niger Delta environment.

In an ironic twist of fate, the biodiversity loss experienced by the poet-persona in the Niger Delta world is at variance with the culture of environmental sustainability in other climes. He muses in the poem “Transplants” thus:

I see transplants of my youth's landscape
first at Hawthornden and now at Steepletop:

the pristine streams, the multiethnic population
of plants, costumed birds, and graceful game.

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

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

The poet-persona uses the signifiers of distant lands where human culture is deployed to nurture nature instead of killing it in the excerpt above. Thus, “Hawthornden” and “Steepletop” are presented as archetypes of model societies or communities worthy of emulation in the crusade towards promoting the ideals of ecocentrism. In admiration of the glamorous and enduring sustainable biodiversity in the distant lands, the poet-persona deploys the adjectives “pristine” to qualify “streams”, “multiethnic” to qualify “population of plants”, “costumed” to qualify “birds” and “graceful” to qualify “game”. The deployment of the comparative form of the adjective “older

(than me)” and the temporal signifier “centuries of seasons” in the declarative sentence “their barks recount centuries of seasons” stresses the enduring preservation of the plants in those model societies.

The import of the metaphor of “transplants” in the poet-persona’s conception of what he misses about his homeland is further intensified in the poem “I had left home with reluctance”:

But what a startling revelation awaits me at home!
Ghosts of all kinds welcomed me to the homeland:
evergreen ghosts standing beside wilted branches
leaving an arboreal graveyard of an entire forest;
ghosts of the game tribe crowding forlorn ruts
now slick routes snaking their way into nowhere;
ghosts teem vacuous holes of abandoned anthills,
ghosts of iguanas, and falcons now on sentry duty.

The choice of the metaphor of “ghost” and its repetition in the nominal groups “ghosts of all kinds”, “evergreen ghosts”, “ghosts of the game tribe” and “ghosts of iguanas and falcons” in the lines above to configure biodiversity loss in the Niger Delta are semiotically significant. That the ghost image hangs over varied species of the ecosystem as opposed to just one further deepens the tragic depletion of biodiversity in the Niger Delta world. Consequently, the invocation of the signifier of “graveyard” used in the nominal group “an arboreal graveyard of an entire forest” is disheartening. The metaphor of graveyard captures the magnitude of the desolation of the Niger Delta world in its present state, harbouring nothing really valuable for human and non-human beings.

Robbed of the essence of his cultural memory in his native Niger Delta environment, the poet-persona rues the reality of the destruction of the biotic community in the poem “Only in his memory”:

Only in his memory
thrive the affluent residents of the wetlands:
the black anthill that wears a conical helmet
the oko bird escorting the current after first rains to the sea
the flutter of butterflies that fills the farm with pageantry
the armada of newly hatched fish in sailing formations
the sleek creeks in flowing sheets cutting across the forest

the double-lined mangroves providing honor guard to boaters.

The first two lines in the excerpt above expressively capture the transmutation of the physical – the coveted beauty of nature and fecundity of biodiversity – to the poet-persona's realm of imagination. Thus, he uses the adverb “only” to capture the manner – abstraction as opposed to reality – of his unthinkable condition of communing with nature. It is intriguing that the poet-persona in his longing reels off a catalogue of cultural signifiers which straddle the unique Niger Delta world: a natural habitat (“the black anthill”), animals (“the *oko* bird”), insects (“the flutter of butterflies”), aquatic life (“the armada of newly hatched fish”), and unique topographies (“the sleek creeks” and “the double-lined mangroves”). All of these variegated cultural signifiers which are no longer accessible in the poet-persona's physical world but only painfully accessible through the power of imagination are also post-modified in each instance of their mention. Hence, we have the post-modifying elements “that wears a conical element”, “escorting the currents after first rains to the sea”, and “that fills the farm with pageantry”, among others, to intensify the poet-persona's deep sense of nostalgia for what has been lost. With this deep sense of loss, the poet-persona, therefore, cuts an ecomilitant figure to reclaim the depleted ecosystem.

Cutting the Ecomilitant Figure for Environmental Sustainability

Right from the title of the section “Songs of the Homeland Warrior” in *Songs of Myself* from which some poems were selected for analysis, the poet-persona with the metaphor of “warrior” announces his cultural struggle to reclaim the soul of his environment from destructive elements. The cultural metaphor of warrior and others which we shall analyse shortly invoke a picture of a battle line drawn between anthropocentric and ecocentric armies. While the former unleashes toxic substances of mass destruction on the environment, the latter led by the poet-persona is fortified with the instrumentality of poetry to fight for an alternative environmental order to regenerate the present balkanised world. Resorting to using the instrument of his poetry to prosecute the environmental crusade resonates with deploying songs as a war strategy in traditional societies to send signals of discontentment to the other warring faction and to inspire the local army.

Poised for a cultural struggle with a clear mandate of an advocacy for environmental justice, the poet-activist declares his intent in the poem “The goat song”. The title of the poem is a cultural signifier in itself for a lament and a tragic song. It is rendered in the present circumstance as a song

of anguish and complaint about the environmental predicament of the Niger Delta as shown in the lines "I sing the land's goat song / the last cry of its warriors". The signifier of "cry" is suggestive of the poet-persona's revolutionary response to environmental injustice in the land. It is interesting that he has chosen to fight for an altruistic cause as opposed to an individualistic one. This is expressed in the signifier of the possessive "community's" in the line "I sing the community's goat song" used in two different senses in the poem. First, it suggests the human community which bears the brunt of the environmental degradation "I sing the people's goat song – / they wear smiles over deep wounds". In another sense, bearing in mind the interdependence of human and non-human species in the ecosystem, the signifier "community" could be interpreted to embody also the non-human elements in the ecosystem which also have welfare rights that have been violated, encroached, eroded and utterly degraded by humans. The violation of the non-human world (community) is pictured in poem "The goat song" thus:

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

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

The big family is dying out – irokos fall; game
leave in droves, and humans flee to hunger.

Reference to the signifier of "the wind" as an element of nature, the signifier of "trees" to typify the flora, the signifier of "the snake" to typify the reptile family in the animal kingdom, the signifier of "iroko" to typify the flora and the signifier of "game" to typify the fauna is striking in cutting a cultural identity for the Niger Delta ecosystem and underlining the tragedy which has befallen the community of non-humans. Why the poet-activist has to fight this war of environmental regeneration is underlined in the use of the signifiers of depletion of biodiversity evidenced in the verbs "burning out", "shaved", "dying out", "fall", and "leave" deployed to deepen the magnitude of violence visited on biodiversity.

The prominence of the first-person singular pronoun "I" in the lines "I sing the community's goat song" and "I sing the people's goat song – / they wear smiles over deep wounds" emphasises the persona's leading role and unwavering sense of commitment to the environmental cause. As a

General in the army of environmental redemptive mission, the poet-persona also prides on his leading role in the poem "If I were to ask my people":

If I were to ask them what they
would do to be free of the hell
that stops them from being farmers
they would pray, sow seeds for
prosperity, and surrender what's
left to pastors for more prayers;
hence you can call me militant
for standing in front for them

The proclamation "hence you can call me militant" is a bold statement of intent with which the poet-persona pursues his ecocentric warfare against the environmental violators. The signifier of positionality "... standing in front for them" emphasises his bravery, unwavering commitment and an unflinching ideological struggle for a new environmental order.

Thus, in the poem "Quatrain suite" the poet-militant hints first at the psychological perspective to the warfare he is poised to fight those who despoil the environment:

My memories chase out the army of poachers.
In their green outfit of old seasons they restore
the tattered map of the country. Now the starving
amongst us trip over carcasses they won't even touch.

That the poet-activist constructs a contemptible identity for the enemy that his environmental army fights is underlined in the nominal labelling of agents of despoliation as "army of poachers". Identifying and negatively labelling the Other who must be resisted, whose nefarious activities must be halted, and who must be utterly defeated in the environmental war are a war strategy of estranging them from the people. Justification for waging a war against the "army of poachers" is brought to the fore in the gloomy picture of the devastating state in which they leave the environment after their reprehensible exploits. As a result, the poet-persona's use of the signifier of "carcasses" left in their trail is compelling. In a combative tone, therefore, he announces the motive of his own army in the poem "I had left home with reluctance": "I turn back to raise an army to rout ghosts and / reinstate life where death has poached a number." The signifier of the verb "raise"

suggests rallying a count-force to confront and rattle the destructive elements of nature. More important, in line with the alternative order the environmental militant seeks to implant in a world of “carcasses” and “ghosts”, the poet-activist's use of the forceful action word “rout” suggests his militant mentality and approach towards environmental restoration. Also, his regenerative/redemptive/restorative mission is conveyed with the signifier “reinstate” (verb) + “life” (noun – object). Life, in this sense, is a metaphor which contrasts with the prevalent images of ghosts and carcasses in the environment.

Stressing the strategy of mobilising foot soldiers for joint efforts to prosecute the environmental war, the poet-persona adopts the semiotic-cum-ideological strategy of a pronominal shift from a singular tone/voice “I” to the plural tone/voice “we” in the poem “At the Kaiama Bridge”: “We have organised a resistance army, / Declared sovereignty over our resources”. The mission of the ecocentric army is reinforced in the signifying nominal adjectival element “resistance”, as it clearly delineates the motive of the warfare for environmental sustainability. With this clear mission, the poet-persona inspires his army in the poem “The mass hunt” thus:

Let's drive them into their holes:

ants that condemn our feet for murder

locusts that consume our greens

crickets that perforate our plots

rats that bite our souls

fouls that ambush us with droppings

fish that diminish our water resources

snakes that plant their teeth in the field

vegetables that throw up the palate's good taste

mushrooms that sell poison in the farmers' market

trees that flaunt scarecrows before our eyes

children that contest seniority with parents

women that do not love with their hearts
men that suffocate with their animal capers

gods that knock worshippers' heads together
let's drive them all into their holes.

There are interesting signifiers of the polemics of resistance in the above lines. First, the inclusive persuasive element "let's" is a first-person plural imperative to mobilise a resistance force/movement towards reclaiming the despoiled ecosystem. Second, the whole of the utterance "let's drive them into their holes" is a signifier for incapacitating the enemies from unleashing further terror on the environment. Third, the metaphors of "ants", "locusts", "crickets", "rats", among others, as destructive elements grafted from the animal kingdom must have been deployed by the poet-persona to capture the animalistic tendencies and unthoughtful actions of the agents of environmental degradation. Hence, their unfriendly ecological activities are catalogued in the verbs "condemn", "consume", "perforate", "bite", "ambush", and "diminish", among others, to give a picture of the annihilation of the environment. These actions encapsulate the semiotics of destruction with which the poet-persona configures a reversal of a natural order, following which chaos, displacement, discomfort, affliction and dislocation loom in the Niger Delta world. Declared anathemas, therefore, the enemies of the environment are to be exorcised from society to usher in a new environmental order.

Combating Agents of Environmental Degradation with Spiritual Forces

Having fully worn the toga of an environmental warlord, the poet-militant invokes the spirits of traditional warlords in the traditional African society to reinforce his mission in the poem "The goat song":

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

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

It is thought-provoking how the poet-persona invokes the practice of African jurisprudence with the invocation of Ozidi (a legendary warrior of the Izon extraction of the Niger Delta) and Ogidigbo (a legendary warrior of the Urhobo extraction of the Niger Delta) as spiritual forces to fight the enemies of the environment. Hence, the signifier of the negative particle “not” in the verbal group “will not forgive” is telling, as it raises serious questions about sin and forgiveness in religion.

Furthermore, in the poem “The goat song”, the poet-persona, probably out of frustration, anger, and utter helplessness at confronting the destroyers of the ecosystem, invokes the wrath of the traditional god of thunder to visit vengeance on violators of the environment:

The capital so afflicted with flatulence,
only thunder can halt insatiable hands

from clearing the commonwealth's table
of cornucopia into paunches of the lords.

The signifier of “thunder” is a cultural semiotic of invoking the wrath of the gods of the land upon errant men and women as vengeance for evils perpetrated in society. That the ecomilitant extends the cultural signifier of the invocation of the god of thunder – known as *Amadioha* among the Igbo and *Sango* among the Yoruba ethnic groups in Nigeria – to mediate in redressing environmental injustice underlines the enormity of the crimes perpetrated against the environment in the Niger Delta. For the god of thunder – always full of fury and vengeance – is spared when interventions are required in trivial matters. In another poem “I pass the same roads”, the persona cries unto the Supreme Being:

I pass the same roads the Bekeremos have passed,
stands at the crossroads of sacrifice to invoke Tamara
to avenge the wrongs done to them and the land.
To those spreading afflictions, Tamara strike them
with loathing for the harm they do without qualms.

The cultural signifier of calling on the Supreme Being to intervene in ensuring environmental justice in the lines above is instructive. Resorting to divinity in resolving environmental crisis is suggestive of failings in the justice system of a society with ineffective environmental laws. Thus, the infinitive “to avenge” is a cultural-cum-religious signifier of the jurisprudential alternative of dispensing justice when and where the laws of the society in question

have failed. One then wonders why and how those negatively labelled as “those spreading afflictions” would not face the full wrath of the law. More worrying is the fact that the violence done to the biotic community is captured in the image of “afflictions”, which suggests the prevalent extermination of the varied species in the ecosystem by human violators. While certain doctrines in some religions advocate forgiveness of sins, the poet-activist appears to have been so much aggrieved by the violators' sins that he does not give the room for any form of repentance by the perpetrators or forgiveness by the Supreme Being. Hence, the cultural signifier of the verb “strike” resonates with the image of the god of thunder we made reference to earlier on in the analysis. While the poet-activist does not mention in particular what the offenders will be stricken with, in the cultural world of some Nigerian societies, perpetrators of serious offences against humanity could be stricken with afflictions in the form of incurable diseases such as outright blindness or paralysis.

In the poem “To the janjaweed”, the persona roars at full throttle in invoking the wraths of either the gods of the land or the Supreme Being on those who violate the environment in the poem in the following lines:

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

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

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

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

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

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

may you escape justice of Khartoum's courts
and be condemned forever in a higher trial

This poem evokes the cultural practice of invoking curses on perceived violators of societal order in traditional African societies. The tone and structure of curses which centre on reversal of fortune are foregrounded in the "may ..." parallel structure in each of the stanzas. In the stanzas, the verbs "scorch", "throw", "be stripped", "to pursue", "strangle", "reduce" (all verbs of action) and the verb of state "become" underline the torment wished the violators of the environment. Further, the spatial signifier "at the other end, "the entire world" and temporal signifiers "vainglorious days", "when you need cover", "the next life", and "forever" all suggest that there would be no haven for the violators of the environment.

Conclusion

This study has applied the tools of cultural semiotics to unpack the protest motif in Tanure Ojaide's ecopoetry. The dominant issues which run through his ecopoetry centre on his depiction of a general atmosphere of chaos and disorder in the ecosystem, his distressing tone of lament in portraying the degree of despoliation in the environment, and his militant figure as an ecoactivist poised to wage an environmental war on the anthropogenic forces. The cultural semiotic analysis underlines the poet-activist's appropriation of cultural signifiers from the besmirched physical environment across the flora and fauna. The study reveals that the meaning-making resources embedded in the sign systems in the protest discourse reflect the ecoactivist's deep sense of loss and consequent rage at the anthropogenic forces responsible for the monumental ecological disaster in the Niger Delta world. It also reveals that the polemics of ecoactivism in the poems typifies the confrontational tone and combative spirit associated with literature of protest.

Largely, in an attempt to address the problem of meaning generation in the selected poems, the sign systems were teased out within the paradigm of Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, which refers to the semiotic environment in which communication occurs and from which it derives its codes. The notion of dialogism, which emphasises that objects of culture are both dynamic and subjective in character, was also brought to bear on making sense of the protest motif and resistance dialectics in the ecopoetry. Thus, the cultural signifiers in the study were analysed by bringing to

bear the present readers' schema on interpreting the textual cues in the analysed poems. This was done by reconstructing the world projected in the text.

References

- Abonyi, C. (2022). Indigenous consciousness and life interconnections: An ecofeminist study of Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* and Ebi Yeibo's *A Song for Tomorrow*. *AlterNative*, 18(1), 46-53. DOI: 10.1177/11771801221088903.
- Agofure, J. O. (2019). Art as eco-protest and communication in Tanure Ojaide's selected poetry. In: S. Slovic, S. Rangarajan, & V. Sarveswaran (Eds.) *Routledge handbook of ecocriticism and environmental communication*, 187-198. Routledge.
- Akani, A. C. (2021). Environmental dereliction in Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. *ANSU Journal of Language and Literacy (AJLLS)*, 1(5), 174-181.
- Alabi, O. S. (2021). Between the praise and defense of nature: An eco-critical discourse of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide's eco-poetry. *International Journal of Language and Culture*, 1(2), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.51483/IJLC.1.2.2021.1-7>.
- Américo, E. V. (2017). The concept of border in Yuri Lotman's semiotics / *O conceito de fronteira na semiótica de Iúri Lotman*. *Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, 12(1), 6-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2176-457326361>
- Ayinde, A. K. (2019). Environmental discourse and revolutionary dialectics in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. *Alore: Ilorin Journal of the Humanities*, 28, 149-156.
- Edem, S. (2016). Poetry as language and ideological tool for environmental agitation: A stylistic study of *Tanure Ojaide* and *Benji Egede's* poetry. *Awka Journal of Linguistics and Languages (AJILL)* 10, 11-36.
- Egya, S. E. (2016). Nature and environmentalism of the poor: Eco-poetry from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28(1), 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2015.1083848>.
- Egya, S. E. (2018). The pristine past, the plundered present: Nature as lost home in Tanure Ojaide's poetry. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 1-15. DOI: 10.1177/0021989418777852
- Egya, S. E. (2020). *Nature, environment, and activism in Nigerian literature*. New York: Routledge.

- Egya, S. E. (2021). The pristine past, the plundered present: Nature as lost home in Tanure Ojaide's poetry. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 56(2), 186-200. DOI: 10.1177/0021989418777852.
- Egya, S. E., Agu, M. N., & Adam, S. (2022). Poetry, protest, and environment: Human and nonhuman rights in Nigerian literature. *Law and Humanities*, 1-21. DOI: 10.1080/17521483.2022.2075172.
- Emama, E. M. (2020). Folklore, cohesion and meaning in Ojaide's *Agbogidi*. *KIU Journal of Humanities*, 5(3): 191-198.
- Enukora, E. (2020). Eco-engagement and existentialist angst in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 8(4), 103-110. DOI: 10.24940/theijhss/2020/v8/i4/HS2004-005.
- Ibhawaegbele, F. O., & Omo-Ojugo, G. I. (2010). The language of satire: An exploration of stylistic devices in Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems*. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 7(2), 135-143.
- Inegbe, M S. (2018). Ideational discourse as tool of style in Ojaide's "Endless Song" and "The dogma of Patience". *International Review of Humanities Studies*, 3(2), 204-213.
- Kadiri, G. C., Maledo, A. E., & Agbo, I. I. (2022). Naming and describing in Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems*. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 40(1), 32-46. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2021.1995450>.
- Laas, O. (2016). Dialogue in Peirce, Lotman, and Bakhtin: A comparative study. *Signs Systems Studies*, 44(4), 469-493.
- Long, J., & He, J. (2021). Cultural semiotics and the related interpretation. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 586, 1268-1272.
- Lotman, J. M. (1984). On semiosphere. *Sign System Studies* 17, 5-23.
- Lotman, J.M. 1990. *Universe of mind. A semiotic theory of culture*. Taurus & Co, Ltd.
- Lotman, J. (2002). Лотман, Юрий. *Статьи по семиотике культуры и искусства*. Санкт-Петербург: Академический проект.
- Lotman, J. M., & Uspenskij, B. A. (1984). *The semiotics of Russian culture*. In: A. Shukman (Ed.) *Michigan Slavic Contributions II*. Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan.
- Maledo, R. O. (2019). Graphological devices and meaning in Tanure Ojaide's poetry. *KIU Journal of Humanities*, 4(1), 39-47.

- Maledo, R. O., & Edhere, J. U. (2021). Experiential metafunction: Representing environmental degradation. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(1), 129-145. <https://doi.org/10.37028/lingcure.v5n1.1081>
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.
- Nöth, W. (2015). The topography of Yuri Lotman's semiosphere. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 11–26. DOI: 10.1177/1367877914528114.
- Nwagbara, U. (2010). Poetics of resistance: Ecocritical reading of Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*. *African Study Monographs*, 31(1), 17-30.
- Oge-Chimezie, O. G. (2018). Environmental perspectives in the selected poetry of Tanure Ojaide. *AJELLS*, 6(2), 83-102.
- Ohagwam, U. (2018). The Niger Delta crises in the Niger Delta Novel: Reflections on Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. *Journal of Arts & Humanities* 07(11), 11-17. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v7i10.1310>
- Ojaide, T. (2015). *Indigeneity, Globalisation, and African Literature: Personally Speaking*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ojaide, T. (2015). *Songs of Myself: Quartet*. Kraftgriots.
- Ojaide, T. (2015). *The Tale of the Harmattan*. Kraftgriots.
- Ojaruega, E. E. (2015). The place of Urhobo folklore in Tanure Ojaide's poetry. *TYDSKRIF VIR LETTERKUNDE*, 52(2), 138-158. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v52i2.10>.
- Ojaruega, E. E. (2022). The Glocal Conundrum: Anthropocene, oil and globalisation in Niger Delta literature. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 10, 15-28. DOI: 10.4236/jss.2022.101002.
- Okoro, D. (2018). Situating Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan*: History, the environment, socio-economic and political concerns, and orature. *Contemporary Literary Review India*, 5(2), 19-62.
- Okuyade, O. (2012). Aesthetic metamorphosis oral rhetoric in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*, 40, 33-52.
- Okuyade, O. (2017). Ebi Yeibo's poetic unfolding of Nigeria's postcolonial history. *World Literature Today*, 91(3-4), 30-33.

- Onyema, C. C., & Onyema, C. C. (2018). Tale of the Harmattan: Environmental rights discourse in Ojaide's eco-poetry. *International Journal of Development and Management Review*, 10, 235-250.
- Orhero, M. I. (2017). Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics in Tanure Ojaide's in *The House of Words and Songs of Myself*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 19(2), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3014>.
- Posner, R. (2005). Basic tasks of cultural semiotics. In: R. Williamson, L. G. Sbrocchi, & J. Deely (Eds.), *Semiotics 2003: "Semiotics and National Identity"*. 307-353. Legas.
- Rueckert, W. (1996). Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism. In: C. Glotfelty, & H. Fromm (Eds.) *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*, 105-111. University of Georgia Press.
- Salupere, S., & Torop, P. (2013). On the beginnings of the semiotics of culture in the light of the Theses of Tartu–Moscow School. In S. Salupere, P. Torop, & K. Kull (Eds.) *Beginnings of the semiotics of culture*, 15-37. University of Tartu Press.
- Sonesson, G. (2001). Bridging nature and culture in cultural semiotics. In: *Bridging Nature and Culture. Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of the IASS*, Guadalajara, Mexico, July, 13-19, 1997. Mexico City: Porrua.1-9.
- Torop, P. (2005). Semiosphere and/as the research object of semiotics of culture. *Sign Systems Studies*, 33(1), 159-173.
- Usanga, K. (2018). Orature and eco-engagement in Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself*. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 4(4), 245-257.
- Zylko, B. (2001). Culture and semiotics: Notes on Lotman's conception of culture. *New Literary History*, 32(2), 391-408.