

## Trembling on the Balance: Women and the Environment in Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* and *The Questioner*

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### Abstract

In African, women and the environment are seen from the sanctity of motherhood through the earth as a sustainable mother. Unruly exploitation of the environment is encouraged by patriarchal capitalism and the domination of the female gender including the environment. This is evident in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria since the discovery of oil in the region. Yet, in contemporary Nigerian literature, ecological writings are dominated by postcolonial eco-critique of socio-economic and political marginalization of the Niger Delta people. Critical attention is focused on the oil wealth of the region but not much attention is given to the devastating condition of women whom depend on farming and fishing to provide for themselves and their children. Using Greta Gaard's integral ecofeminism and life interconnections, this paper investigates environmental pollution and implications on women and other life forms in Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* and *The Questioner*.

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, Oil Pollution, Gender Violation, Trauma, And Environmental Sustainability.*

### INTRODUCTION

Nature's environment constitutes life and as much as man desires to live in good health and wealth, his existence as studies would show, depicts a paradoxical reality. Thus, Man in his capitalist insatiability continues to degrade the environment upon which life is sustained. (O'Sullivan & Taylor 2004; Morton, 2010; Estok, 2014). Ecological crisis we face today, is according to Morton, "so obvious that it becomes easy-for some, strangely or frighteningly easy-to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected" (p.1). Estok simply describes climate change as a consequence of failure to respect or even notice the elemental medium in which we are immersed. Believing in life interconnections and ecological proximity, Estok like many other scholars maintains that global warming and global weirding is a simple consequence of taking the air for granted (Slaymaker, 2007 and Iheka, 2018). This is ecological thought as Morton would put it and "the more we consider it, the more our world opens up" (p. 1). And in considering the environment further, Greta Gaard argues that it is necessary to see the environment and the motherhood of all life through integral ecofeminism and life interconnectedness (p. 1-2).

This paper explores the relationship between women and the environment in two collections of poetry by Ojaide: *The Tale of the Harmattan* and *The Questioner* to interrogate the relationship between women, the environment and the unruly exploitation that leaves both women and the environment trembling on psychological and socio-cultural balance. This ecofeminist enquiry is necessitated by a literary gap discoverable in African literature and the Niger Delta environment. The Niger Delta region is according to many studies the worst oil polluted environment in the worlds (Epstein and Selber, 2002; Agya, 2013; Iheka, 2018 and

Onome, et al. 2020). While Epstein and Selber talk about the biodiversity and socio-economic loss in the region, Onome, et al investigate the health implications of oil pollution ranging from cancer and numerous respiratory diseases arising from ceaseless fire and the inhaling of toxic air and oily water consumption. Iheka raises some questions on oil exploration and socio-economic resistance in the Niger Delta. It is therefore Iheka's conclusion that a reconsideration of catastrophic strategies of resistance is necessary. Such catastrophic strategies include militancy, breaking of pipeline and other forms of violent protests that occupy the region since the early 1980s. The necessity of such reconsideration, according to Iheka is "because of detrimental implications that often characterize them" (p. 85). Africans are therefore encouraged to be sure attuned to the ecological implications of postcolonial and neocolonial oppression to avoid being complicit in the problems they seek to address (Egya, p. 90).

In this regard, the above studies pursue nature and human environmental relationship, but gender seems quite ignored even though it is a major element of African environment including that of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. From Chinweizu (2007), African writers and criticism are compared to the "prodigal" who is asked to come home. Life interconnection and ecological proximity find root in African ontologies of the earth, deified in soil and water goddesses which share with women in life given and sustenance. Ecofeminism and life interconnection is therefore a homecoming in African literature and the study of the environment. From Psychoanalysis and integral ecofeminism, women environmental relationship is necessitated by this obvious gender negligence in existing literature. This paper hopes to bridge the existing gap in literature by shifting African feminist discourse from postcolonial politics to an ecological root and engagement by giving an indigenous theoretical perspective of life interconnection as depicted in Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* and *The Questioner*. Finally, the imaginative voice is subsequently brought to the investigation of trauma and environmental degradation which pushes the women into activism and peaceful protest for environmental sustainability.

### **1.1 Feminism and postcoloniality: A Decolonial Dialectics in African Literature**

Prior to environmental studies and ecocritical literature, African feminism is a robust area of specialization which is dominated by postcolonial narratives about patriarchy and sexuality in different African culture and tradition (Chukwuma, 1994; Adichie, 2015 and Gbaguidi, 2018). Patriarchy according to Gbaguidi imposes on women such values like disinterested love, economic dependency, fear and submissiveness to male folk. These attributes according to Gbaguidi, are disillusioning to the postcolonial African woman who is doubly confronted with colonial alienation and patriarchal oppression. The African woman therefore is portrayed as incapable of making her own decisions in life so that men have to take decisions for her. "These negative stereotypes ruled the mind of the postcolonial African society as the woman's contributions including arts and creative writings got neglected, abandoned and usually omitted" (Chukwuma, p. 203). The exclusion of the woman from socio-political engagements and the outright denial of rightful opportunities to try herself and her abilities foregrounds the endless cry against gender marginalization in African literature. Gender, however, becomes obviously more complicated as awareness continues to grow and women advocates became stigmatized and feminist are simply said to be unhappy. Adichie shares her personal experience, saying "So I decided to call myself a Happy Feminist" (p. 9). This is her response to a Nigerian Journalist who advised her in 2003 never to call herself a feminist irrespective of her work which is already believed to be feminist. Since the African woman from the ongoing is complicated in postcoloniality, it follows that postcolonialism will

continue to palpate and insufficiently engage the image of the woman in African literature. For instance, feminist attention is shifted from a deep-rooted gender struggle to the surface, proffering postcolonial power sharing and economic struggles over decoloniality and indigenous gender consciousness. As a renaissance, decoloniality of knowledge and indigenous gender consciousness addresses the African woman from the root by revitalizing the position of the woman in African homes and without which what there will be no humanity this is the gender ideology that worked for Africans before the cultural land slide call colonization. This feminist inclusive ideology is emphasized by Fanon (1967) as he asks:

What is the good of a fine position if it does not culminate in a family, in something that can be called home? African will never be happier in Europe than at home, for he is asked to live without the very substance of his affectivity. Cut off from his origins and cut off from his ends, he is a thing tossed into the great sound and fury, bowed beneath the law of inertia (p. 15).

African feminism has come of age and cannot continue to exist on a limbo, cut off from its origin and cut off from its end, existing as a thing tossed into the great sound and fury, signifying nothing in the words of Shakespeare. African feminism again culminates in family, but the human family is incomplete without a home in an environment with the rest of the other life forms that make up a community of life. For the idea of home is again quite beyond a house and Fanon means the African environment and her interconnected life when he refers to Africa as “home”. In Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan*, “Womb-wrapped” demonstrates an image of dots within a circle where a child is born onto a community and upon the hearing of a baby’s cry, “the forest birdsong after birdsong leads // the minstrel into the muse’s ample bosom” (Verse 2. Line 1 and 2). African home and family engendered in this ecofeminist discourse include environmental space and life interconnections. Ojaide’s *The Questioner* does not run short of the images of African home and life interconnectedness as poems like “They Have Everything Handed to Them” celebrates the Niger Delta’s wealth of environmental life in an interconnected form which “If you touch one of them, you have stirred the entire swarm // that will swoop from every corner with poisonous stings” (Stanza 4. Line 1&2). From these shot lines, the voice dwells upon the wealth of numerous beings available in the imaginative space of the Niger Delta region. This is a region blessed with numerous water bodies including creeks, rivers and the Atlantic Ocean located in a rain forest. Both aquatic and terrestrial beings exist in the community of life. Fanon proposes revolution for decoloniality and insights the participation of women saying:

The women, the family, the children, the aged-everybody participates. The double oppression, social and sexual, of the woman cracks and is finally shattered; and its essential nature as the social oppression of the family as a whole is revealed. It is simply that its weakest parts-the children, the elderly, the women-must bear the most exaggerated forms of oppression (4).

Since Fanon is quite conscious of the position of women as the double oppressed among the colonized people, he invites them to participate in the decolonial struggles knowing that they bear the most exaggerated forms of oppression. Postcolonialism therefore may continue to undermine gender struggles in African literature just as feminism might continue to romanticize it. Feminism as a theoretical compass should look out for the ‘other’ who in patriarchy are faced with double oppression as well. Those are the members of the family which in the idea of Ojaide, receives a child with diverse songs. A child, therefore, is born onto humans and nonhuman members of the environment, family and home.

Generally, on rethinking African poetry before criticism, Chinweizu (dwells on modern African poetry of which postcolonial feminist poetry belongs. In his attempt to draw some distinctions and establish what an African poetry should look like, he exemplified with the works of three African poets including Nassir's *Gnomic Verses*, p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and Okigbo' "Path of Thunder". These works according to Chinweizu are enriched with African culture and tradition which are scarcely present in most African modern poems. The liberalized kind of feminism applied by African critics raise a lot of issues that leads to critical assumptions and doubt as to what end a westernized feminism would be to a postcolonial culture and people. And from his conclusion, Chinweizu maintains that:

One would be confessing to unawareness of this widespread of danger of cultural servitude masquerading as cultural development; this danger of cultural death wearing mask of "civilization", this danger from which we are already half dead. But how do we make the distinction loaded with consequences of life and death for African culture?" (p.219).

Postcoloniality therefore continues to tremble on the balance. But like prodigals, Chinweizu beckon on modern African poets and asks them to come home. In African literature, feminism like postcoloniality is as well, found trembling, because gender is a part of African culture which presently exists like "a thing cut off from its origins and cut off from its ends and tossed into the great sound and fury, lowered beneath the law of inertia" (Fanon, p. 15). There is necessitates the need for decoloniality of gender and postcoloniality, thus, a multidisciplinary project of life interconnectedness. In an attempt therefore, to decolonize the narrative, this paper traces gender from the root which is the environment and how oil pollution leaves women and the environment trembling. Ecofeminism and life interconnections is further interrogated in the subsequent sections as an encompassing and a more indigenous approach to African environmental consciousness.

### **1.1 Ecofeminism and Life Interconnections in Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* and *The Questioner***

In the introduction to *Ecocriticism as theory and application*, Cheryl Gloatfelty and Harold Fromm (1996) posit that ecocriticism offers some understanding of the relationship between human and his environment (p. xvi). But more specifically is ecofeminism which unites women and the environment in an interconnection of life through a selfhood of sacredness. Ecofeminism establishes women and the environment by identifying them from historical and philosophical point of view. Plant (1989) summarizes ecofeminism as a theoretical movement with the view of the ecosystem as a web of differences. According to Plant, "if one species eats all its food-that is, "dominates" – it soon leaves that neck of woods or dies". (p. 249) Ecofeminism, she maintains, is a compassionate framework for collective life; where people are respected for who they are, with the inclusion of all living things (p. 250). Again, Gaard and Murphy (1998) introduces ecofeminism as eco-gender representations and investigation in literature and general discourse. The definition of this theory gave rise to so many voices that led critics like Biehl Janet (p. 9) to look down on ecofeminism for being so diverse as though it has no center. A look at some definitions of this theory reveals some diverging views among scholars that make ecofeminism complex and continuous.

Legler (1997) in her definition of ecofeminism sees ecofeminist theory as a critical tool in poetry, novel, essay and nonfiction that must first reinterpret the values of nature-literature

and secondly, must promote a revision of the human relationships with the natural world. For Manjula Davidson and Sushman Raj (p. 1) ecofeminism is a pragmatic pose of feminists in the twenty-first century. From such divergence, ecofeminism becomes adequate for intersectionality and multidisciplinary approach that authenticate the scope of this article. In her article, Gaard (2009) categorizes different ecofeminist hypothesis to arrive at what she calls integral ecofeminism. She collects the overall ideas of interconnectedness stipulated in various branches of ecofeminism and notes that the theoretical base of ecofeminism is generally expressed as a sense of “self-interconnectedness with all life” (p. 1). This is according to her, a sentiment of relationship to the whole of which human is a part. Such a sense of relationship to the entire web of life, Gaard describes as exactly what is required in order to break various dualistic mindsets. Therefore, it will help create a worldview that incorporates the value and wisdom of the non-dominant ‘othered beings’ among which are the female, the chthonic, the voiceless and the unheard. At the outset, the project of integral ecofeminism Gaard maintains it is that of an embodied spiritual philosophy which understands the central role of the woman, the earth bodies such as land and water, and the female deities in life giving and sustenance (p. 10). According to Shiva (1989), ecofeminism should be mastered as a guide for every human and nature relationship. It is therefore, in Shiva’s opinion, a pathway towards accomplishing a more balanced worldview, while promoting environmental sustainability and the well-being of diverse, autonomous communities. Ecofeminist interconnectedness also presents the sacredness of relationship, inviting humans to become one in what she describes as “self- other and personal- planetary concerns” (p. 42).

Ecofeminism has a lot to draw from indigenous ontology of earth deities and water goddesses. According to Sylvia Tamale, women and their environment are one as demonstrated in a Zulu song that says, “I am river, I am mountain, I am land, I am sun, I am tree and I am Lake” (p. 84). African cosmos is metaphorically linked to a spider web and the least element cannot be touched without affecting the whole (p. 84-85). This is recurrent in Ojaide’s poetry as demonstrated in “Don’t Bless Me Alone” from *Questioner*. The persona starts by saying:

Don’t bless me alone  
I am not alone; we come to you  
In one prayer but aren’t only one.  
What you can bless me with, you can  
Deploy to two, three, four, or more  
(Stanza 1, Lines 1-5).

These lines speak to the interconnected life that shows inseparability. The voice asks for blessing but chooses not to be blessed alone. His petition goes beyond the self to include others, whose identity the persona seems not to be in haste to mention because they all share in the interconnections of all life. The persona refers to them as his neighbors which can be seen in subsequent verses: “I have incredible neighbors // I would not have known // Had I not prayed not to be blessed alone” (Stanza 3, Line 1-3). The word “incredible” leaves me with an imagination of sort, wonderful beings and relatives that the voice would not have known, had he not prayed to be blessed with the rest of his community members. It is interesting at this point to note that the persona “leaves at the crossroads of sacrifices which // the vulture spirits away to you...” (Stanza 3, Line 5 and 6) and these lines introduce the animal and the spirits as

part of the living environment. The voice eventually rises to the identity of his neighbors saying:

I am not alone in the refuge  
Osun decrees and maintains all beings-  
Monkeys, squirrels, birds, and all that flourish;  
Populations of undergrowth and overgrowth  
Don't bless me alone-  
Everybody else's peace is also mine  
My security is theirs. Bless my neighbors;  
Don't bless me alone (Stanza 3, Lines 10-17).

There is no doubt therefore, that in Niger Delta region, humans and nonhumans interrelate in a given environment. And the evidence is clear in the last lines quoted above. It is again heartrending to observe that in the vast Niger Delta enclave as represented in the collections under study, humans cry for the peace of others in order to have theirs and vice versa (Line 15-16). One would, therefore, want to know from poetic examples the theoretical significations of ecofeminism since none of the images raised in the lines above appeals to gender indices.

In preface to an indigenous perspectives on ecofeminism in Africa, Oduyoye (2020) identifies Africa in relation to the earth saying, "the earth and Africa are both referred to as 'Mother'. This feminization of Africa and the Earth was captured in her idea of Mother Africa who is slow in response to exploitation just as the African woman is slow to patriarchal aggressions" (p. xiii). Oduyoye further traces the sacredness of the *Asaase Yaa* a feminine god and her relationship with the *Twi* name for earth and establishes both in ecofeminist interconnection. Looking at "Don't Bless Me Alone" continues, one would envision the image of the environment, its space and accommodation and the voice calls it "My hostess" (Stanza 3, Line 8). This hostess is the earth herself, upon whose body life is formed and sustained. The persona emphasizes that: "My hostess has appropriated divine fishtail // and showers on me, a cornucopia of gift" (Line 8 and 9). Indigeneity is clearly captured in the symbolic image of a fishtail. As a metaphor, indigenous to African poetic sensibility. The voice celebrates the appropriation of a divine fishtail which showers him with abundance instead of the Western conception of a cocktail drink and party. Again, in the second and third stanzas of "Lesson from Grandma's night-time school" in *The Tale of the Harmattan*, the voice deifies the environment saying:

I took to the boats and so fished the bigger streams singing to Mami Water  
To bring me boatloads of good fortune from her depths  
Every season feted residents with abundance  
And we reciprocated hospitality with offerings  
Humans and spirits married for love of life

Among the Urhobo people of Nigeria, the image of Mami Water signifies a maiden of extra ordinary beauty, a female body usually of a water goddess. Thus, the persona calls on the water goddess to bring him a boatload of good fortune from her depths. The application of the

feminine pronoun ‘her’ is however, reinstating the ecofeminist claims of the earth as female who in African ontological view, is a mother.

This understanding is drawn from Oduyoye’s argument that “If the Earth is a sacred entity in African world view, then, human sacrilegious attitude towards the earth and the rest of beings is key contributing factor to environmental degradation” (p. xiv). Oduyoye’s ecofeminist findings resonate with Estok’s belief that global warming and global weirding are simple consequences of taking the air for granted. But the woman is relegated to the background and from the Western religious (biblical) account of creation, she is the fall of man and cannot stand on her own. She is thus, the other in gender binaries and so is the environment in nature //culture. In Africa, the environment is given to some sacred ontologies that perceive her as mother who shares with women in life given and sustenance. The Niger Delta environment for example belongs to a people whose environmental proximity is informed by their cultural belief that life is an interconnection within a rich space of various nature bodies as deify in their various soil and water goddesses. This is evident in “Quatrain Suite” from *The Tale of the Harmattan* as the persona laments the degradation caused by oil spill and fire blowout. The voice outlines various parts of the environment as casualties of oil exploration and in stanza five, the voice decries the condition of the entire landscape saying:

The map of my homeland has changed  
The cartographers bolt out forests and rivers  
Oil wells and flares dots the new landscape-  
Now nobody recognizes the face of the beauty queen’s face  
(Line1-5).

The persona again shows that the Niger Delta environment is female as represented in the last line of the quotation above. Note that the environment is not just female, she is a queen in the royal sense of gerontocracy. Is anybody ever older than his or her mother? To provide answers to this question, the Urhobo one of the major ethnic groups in the region of the Niger Delta is traced to their ancestral mother known as *Inene-odo*. She is the mother of the land. The Urhobo people had a strong traditional practice which is deeply rooted in the spirituality of all beings so that life interconnection is quite beyond the physical environment. *Inene*’s image as a queen mother, is usually held as a staff by elders and community chiefs. This cultural image signifies the mother of all being for the Urhobo people and similar belief systems rule other ethnic groups in the region (Abonyi 2022. P. 46). A strong interconnection exists between the people and their environment- water and the mangrove forests.

Beside the ancestral figure, this relationship finds centrality in the femaleness and motherhood shared by women and the earth environment as given in the following stanza of “For my Grandchild” in *The Tale of Harmattan*. “My children have had no scholarships // they can’t fish or tap rubber as I once did” (Stanza, 1, Line, 1 and 2). The reason is because

The eye of the earth beholds a vandalized fortune  
The ears of the earth numb from the deep silence  
Its veins clogged by an abundance of oily grease,  
its heart beats irregular drum that fades away  
(Stanza 10, Lines -4).

Since the river is persistently poisoned, the fishes all die, and the rich mangrove forest becomes infertile as a result of oil seepage and ceaseless fire. Women are depicted as the most vulnerable again in “Not that Bad yet, Says the Hyena” from *The Questioner*. The hyena is usually the predator in a jungle thus, it is not surprising to hear it reporting that the situation in the Niger Delta is “not that bad yet, even as mothers auctioned their virtue to feed // children and husbands and found no words to pass on their stories” (Stanza 2, Line1&2). From the image of the jungle, the Niger Delta environment is terrorized by the hyena representing the patriarchs- Nigerian Military Government and the multinational oil companies. They hold the environment in captivity and women and children are faced with nothing but survival.

Although the Urhobo is a patriarchal society, women still play their role as demonstrated in the lines above. There is cultural veneration to women which has its root to nature. It is this women/nature relationship that present the African woman including those of the Niger Delta region beyond the physical image of mere humans. Abonyi attributes this veneration to some maternal affinity, stating that “This is possible because the care women have over children is similar to the care found between the river spirits and the people” (p. 23). Females in this region bear such names as Ohwevwo which means good human relationship and Akporvwovwo that suggests futurism and sustainable life (Abonyi, p. 46). This ontological view largely relates to African people whose environment before Westernization is understood as an all-embracing system of life that is shaped and sustained by the benevolence of the mother earth. Therefore, “having revered earth as the sustenance of creation, among other things and seeing women as earth in human form, the destinies of women and earth have been linked together in the religious space of indigenous African worship and culture” (Boateng, 2020. p. 37). It follows that ecofeminism and life interconnections is a continuum within a space that is sustained by earth deities under the care of women.

Having established ecofeminism and life interconnections in the poems under study, it is however, justified from the ongoing that within the scope of integral ecofeminism, life interconnectedness is theorized in line with Africa ontologies of the earth and the life beyond. To drive our argument further, the following is an investigation of the trajectory of human and nonhuman existence in the Niger Delta. This is implicated by life in a polluted environment that necessitates trauma and return of the repressed as effective ecofeminist struggle for survival in the region.

### **1.2 Environmental pollution, Trauma and Survivability in Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan* and *The Questioner*”**

There is no better way to understand environmental pollution than a reading of the lines below from “Quatrain Suite” in *The Tale of the Harmattan*:

Evergreens bald, every head bowed in disgrace.  
No seasons grow back flared or suffocated leaves  
And the cycle of self-succeeding generations dies.  
Green is now a scarce commodity in the rain forest  
(Stanza 9, Lines 1-5)

If a rain forest like the Niger Delta is delivered in the image of an old man with bald head and no season grows back the burnt and asphyxiated leaves, then what becomes of life that

depends on the benevolence of the earth environment in form of fishing and farming? It is yet more critical as:

Neighbors are surrendering their homes  
To destruction by oil fire  
Others have the soil burning underfoot  
Their shield of green gone; mere ashes  
("At the Kaiama Bridge", Stanza, 8, Lines 1-4).

Nothing therefore is more traumatizing than witnessing the ravaging of one's home by blazing fire, set by strangers whose desire is to enrich their pause and leave notwithstanding the circumstances that bedevil the environment. It is noteworthy to understand that environmental degradation is a global phenomenon that affects all life especially women and children. It is the conclusion of the 2004 United Nations Women's Assembly that women and children are often the first victims of environmental degradation. It is recognized that the undue exploitation of the environment is foregrounded in gender marginalization as women and the poor are usually trapped in an unhealthy relationship with polluted environment. Since the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta, the people are faced with a lot of challenges especially the multinational companies which handle the environment with recklessness. This is implicated in the youths' incessant demands for resource control or improved revenue allocation from the Government of Nigeria through detrimental bunkering and militancy. Women are therefore left with the polluted environment since they must take care of their children knowing they are the less educated and the economically unempowered. In "Lessons from Grandma's Night-Time School" in *The Tale of the Harmattan* children as the persona unveils, learn to fish the waters for survival, so: "We cast nets wide for the turtle of the tales // to torment the trickster in a boiling cauldron" (Stanza 2, lines 1 and 2).

There may be a need, however, to understand the availability of life and livelihood within the environment before the discovery of oil in the region. Life as depicted in these poems was in abundance following the voice in the subsequent lines of "Lesson from grandma's night-time school":

Every season feted residents with abundance  
and we reciprocated hospitality with offering  
Humans and spirit married for love of live...  
We reaped bushels of goodwill without efforts  
Because no-one ate outside of the open gathering-  
We consorted with birds and animals,  
Communed with plants on fresh draughts  
That rain and sunlight provide for growth  
(Stanza 3, Lines 7-19)

From environmental pollution, trauma and depression among the Niger Delta people is simply a tragedy which is best describe in the idea of (Miller, 1949). According to Miller, such tragedy is derived from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being

torn away from the human chosen image of what or who he is in this world. Among people today this fear is as strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best (p. 3).

The inhabitants of the Niger Delta are by Miller's description, the common man, who knows this fear best. Miller further talks about the state of the mind which literature overlooks for being psychiatry, but literature cannot because fear dwells in the subconscious of all beings. The Niger Delta experience is full of fear. This leaves the people obviously traumatized that even as they struggle to survive amidst pollution and hardship, it is evident that fear, the kind they know best, comes upon them and in "Social Being" from *The Questioner*, the persona cries: "But they want to crush me when I seek a hermitage //something always drives them into where I seek solitude" (Line 10 and 11). That is trauma characterized in the voice and in "For How Long?" from the same collection, the persona asks for how can long life go on a hospitable landscape that suddenly turned hostile and how long can giant iroko stand to survive the assault of apocryphal storms and how long can the sun keep away from its high density (Line 5-9)?

Trauma is a Freudian conception of tragic experiences which, thereafter, leaves an individual as mere victim of some external agents. This means that such individuals are often in need of physical and psychological support. James Berger (1997) posits that "traumatic experiences tend to be repressed but will definitely return in a compulsive repetition that drives the victim hysteric to a possibly, tragic climax" (p. 575). The destruction of the environment continues to traumatize the inhabitants of the Niger Delta despite their efforts to suppress and push the ordeal to the unconscious. As repressive mechanism, the people develop patience and hope that oil drilling will be over so that in "Still Waiting" from *The Questioner*, the voice describes the people's patience saying:

This thing called patience is so persistent.  
Not just a crocodile waiting for a catch  
At the water's edge. It is hope that another  
Season will prevail and the hurt of today  
Will intensify into copious tears of happiness (Line 1-5).

Life, however, continues as the environment deteriorates. Although, in the people's expectations, they believe that extravagant drilling and mismanagement of their natural resources will soon come to an end. Their hope is raised by the fact that oil and gas account for Nigeria's ninety percent (90%) of export income and eighty-five percent government revenue from 1990 onwards. It is believed that the government and the multinational oil companies will take the cleaning of the environment seriously and handle it with care, so that the multi-million national capitalist venture can be of little consequence to life in the region. Unfortunately, it becomes ironic and somewhat paradoxical to say that neither the government of Nigeria nor the multinational oil companies cares about oil pollution and what becomes of life in the region. How therefore can patience persist as one cannot live anymore on the land that was the primeval provider? The situation is worsened as oil seepage and oil flushes wiped out the sea hosts including the fishes. The persona calls it a sludge of poisons in "For Ebesu Boys" in *The Tale of the Harmattan*. In the subsequent lines, the voice maintains that:

You cannot even drink water from anywhere-  
They pissed down barrels of arsenic into it.

They flare gas to raise the demands for the commodity  
 And in so doing, mangle every farmer's harvest  
 Ther spray the airspace with methanol and insidious  
 Chemicals- you cannot breathe clean air anymore  
 ("For the Egbesu Boys, Stanza 21, Lines 1- 6).

In uncontrollable oil fire, farms roast to ashes and forest life is made history. With the particulate matter of fumes, breeding asthma and other respiratory diseases, the people and other life forms are received to a cancer-prone generation. Hunger, therefore, is on the loose as life continues to be terminated by strange diseases.

"The Wind is Blowing my Mind Away" depicts the height of trauma as the voice observes that "A town young with grey hair is passing (Stanza 2, Line 1)" and all the voice could do is to nod his head without words. "I am tongue-tied in the midst of parrots" (Line 2) suggests that there are so much to say than words can bear. As repression signifies, trauma leaves its victim dumb till the repressed returns. Then, one comes to a clear understanding the subsequent lines as: "The fear of death is not there anymore // If the iroko grew roots up and leaves down // would it still be the great concave of spirits"? (Stanza 1, Lines8 and Stanza 2, Lines 5 & 6). And in *The Questioner*, the voice in "For How Long" worries as discussed earlier how long he would be able to go with the prevailing circumstance in the Niger Delta. He fears and groans about shame and mockery incurred by the collapse of his environment to "those who treat themselves with my abundance // while keep theirs to see them through famine" (Lines 2 and 3). In a voice full of fear, the persona bellowed: "They will continue to mock me till I die" ("They Mock Me", Line 8). The voice realizes that oil drilling has come to stay, and the detrimental implications are no one else's business than those inhabiting the environment. He goes in lamentation of the hospitality shown to the government and the explorers at the onset of oil exploration saying they are "the monkey that tricks me into its iron cage // and jumps from one tall tree branch to another // who robs me of my treasures in the dark and by" (Line 6-13). To draw the ecofeminist line and the trajectory of environmental catastrophe, women became doubly oppressed as militancy and violence engulfs the area. The eleventh stanza of "For the Egbesu Boys" observes rape and the vulnerability of women amidst crises in the region saying: "Who come to your home to rape your bride // tests your courage before the vile act // what man cannot cover his love with his body". This is without an acknowledgment of the agony of the woman who suffer the brunt. The women therefore become completely displaced as they cannot go to the farm and rivers alone for the fear of rape, yet children must survive.

Survival is an instinct that assures one that life could still go on. And in "For my Grandchildren" in the *The Tale of the Harmattan*, women engage in a futurist rhetoric that evaluates the sustainability of life in the degraded region saying:

My children have had no scholarship  
 They can't fish or tap rubber as I once did  
 The river transformed into a snake of a tomb  
 And the forest fraught with flares and fumes  
 With crude oil gushing into slave ships (Lines 1-5)

So elderly women of menopausal age gathered in what can be described as taboo-anchored activism in protest against environmental pollution and gender violation. Women found themselves abandoned with the degraded environment and the environment is battered in capitalism just as the women in patriarchy. The two are, however, trembling on socio-cultural and psychological balance. Life in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is trauma signified. The people especially the women do not fear death anymore as the voice in above lines maintains. Yet, they are aware of the magnitude of violence that ravages their environment over the years. Militancy and several other crises have claim lives including women and children. Thus, violent protests are also not an option for the safety of any environment. Nevertheless, action must be taken, so:

Villages of imploring eyes marching, hands up  
Raises with green- leafed branches, mowed down  
CNN & BBC embedded with Chevron and Shell  
report that local women, stripping before cameras  
to save their dying children and men are primitive (Stanza 8-10, Lines 1-5).

Though, the movement recorded mass casualty, as the Nigerian Army would brandish loaded guns in favor of the government and multinational oil companies. The second line of the quotation above captures the magnitude of human lose. Women may have been killed in the process but in their instinct that life must go on, they believe that “with my grandchild born, the new Stone Age / of a nation very black in the book has begun” (Stanza 11, Line 1 & 2).

## CONCLUSION

Trembling on the balance is a conception of survival instinct and the struggle to hold onto what is almost lost. Humanity is at the point of losing the earth’s environment to anthropocentric insatiability as though there are other earth(s). The conceptualization of women and the environment in a life displacing Niger Delta region is an ecological grief that gender and postcolonial studies must contextualize and continually interrogate from life interconnections and sustainability question. From ecofeminism and life interconnections, this article demonstrates the Niger Delta environment as a mother, yet she is found battered and trembling just as the women of the Niger Delta region. Beyond a mere metaphorization of the earth as a female, life interconnection binds the entire ecosphere as one life sustained in one body of the earth which like a mother ought not to be violated or broken since humans exist but as a part dependent on the other parts for sustenance. It is therefore obvious from the paper that Man is in a paradoxical relationship with the environment earth. And by unruly exploiting the environment. His actions are like a time-bomb which explodes to the detriment of the dominator. This paper, therefore, is a multifaceted interrogation of gender and eco-poetics towards a sustainability of the Niger Delta environment.

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