

ECOPOETICS IN NIGERIA: THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE IN THE POETIC METTLE OF CHRISTIAN OTOBOTEKERE

Prof. Ifeyinwa J. Ogbazi

Department of English Language and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka
Email: ji.ogbazi@unizik.edu.ng

&

Bryan Jachukwu Udeh

Department of English
Chukwuememeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Email: byranudeh9@gmail.com

Abstract

One of the major characteristics of Eco-poetry as defined by James Engelhardt (2007) is a true connection to the world that implies responsibility. Eco-poetry is "surrounded by questions of ethics". (6) This means that Eco-poetry is located within that thin margin between man and nature. This research examines and explores the extent to which the eco-poet understudy have portrayed serious concerns for the protection and preservation of the environment from anti-natural and ecological activities through his writings. This concept stands for poetry with a strong environmental importance or meaning. In the realms of Ecopoetry lies man's desire to be attuned with the cadences of nature. Eco-poetry becomes, man's weapon for guarding nature's gift from predators militating against the preservation of the environment. This paper places the works of Christian Otobotekere within the realms of Ecopoetics by x-raying the Ecotones and the languages of nature as portrayed by this sage of Nigerian poetry. This paper seeks to establish that the Ecotones in the poems of Christian Otobotekere entail strong sense of responsibility to his society and nature. This scholarship also aims at exploring the figurative and aural capacity of the language he used to evoke the natural world in this authoritative technique. Christian Otobotekere's *Beyond Sound and Voice* and *Live2Lives* are two typical collection of poems that are deeply rooted in the ravages of the Niger Delta contemporary society have been used in this study.

Keywords: Eco-poetry, Ecotones, Ecopoetics, Nature

Introduction

The concept of Ecopoetics opens up a doorway into the nature of relationship that exist between man and his environment This is in due consideration of the fact that we live in a postmodern world strongly attached to the umbilical cord of the interdependence of the body upon its world for its wellbeing. Ecopoetics therefore, becomes an inevitable outcome or derivative of the interactions between a lucid soul and his environment. As an Eco-poet, Christian Otobotekere is of the infinite belief that poetry is the best means of directly addressing an environment in disaster.

The poet's belief about poetry goes in line with the principles of Ecopoetics which stipulates that for a poem or poet to be tagged "eco," there must be a true concern for so many elements of nature in the writing. This implies that the essential concern of the Eco-poet must be on everything. The Eco-poet questions everything starting from the ink marking the lines of his own works to the white spaces in between the lines, to the paper upon which the poem is printed or scribbled he Eco-poet becomes one with the natural world and the poem itself an embodiment of ecology representing the microcosmic ecosystem in which itself dwells. Skinner declares that:

Ordinarily, the contemporary Eco-poem is self-aware of itself as a construct, and of the larger role of the poet/poem/poetics in the context of the larger ecosystem of literature and the outside world. A category distinct from beauty: the sublime as the aesthetic of vastness, magnificence, power, and fear...politics has invaded the landscape...the landscape is now a victim of history...history is not only the history of human actions, of causes, but the history of effects, of ecological damage. Thus, we see not the soldiers bombing the landscape- action pictures- but the landscape shattered by bombs...Our morality is complicated by the fact that the sky above even the most demonic folly is often exquisitely coloured, and its clouds as breathtakingly pure. (47)

Many Nigerian poets and poems have expressed deep ecological concerns. Within the Nigerian literary scene, the study of the environment has often been easily located in the discourses of poets like J.P. Clark in his cultural conservation motifs, Tanure Ojaide in his socio-political angst motifs and Gabriel Okara in his river motifs. Several other poets have copiously framed the Nigerian environmental experiences within the meeting points of Ecopoetics but never has a poet delved so deeply into the secret places of nature heart to unravel that which lies beneath the hearth like the Poet King, Christian Otobotekere. The Poet King has deeply enacted the natural world in his works thereby prompting Ecocritics and other literary scholars interested in the environment to examine these writings that pertain directly to nature and to focus on the eco-subject-matters and ecoexpressions therein portrayed. An African poetry critic GMT Emezue writes of Christian Otobotekere's collection, *Next to Reality*:

It takes the reader on a mind's journey into phases of events and moods where life is re-experienced in an imaginary threshold that is next or alternative to reality. Through a philosophical hindsight that investigates the condition of man on earth and his relationship with nature, the poet recreates vivid images of the past. The platform for this imaginative exploration is poetry while the vehicle for this mental perception is the mind. Through the poet's mind, therefore, memories flash through as "bracing winds and fawning waves," which are timeless and immortal sources of joy that keep the poet's spirit uplifted. In a semi-religious reflective mood, the poet contemplates the act of remembering.(9)

This paper explores the works of Christian Otobotekere as a partner toiling together with nature from the location of shared community and the shared experiences of countering environmental degradation and the mutiny of nature. This scholarship is an attempt to work toward a definition of the radical indigenous Ecopoetics in Otobotekere's works. It will attempt to trace the themes that give rise to the Ecotones in Otobotekere's works and how they are manifested conceptually and linguistically. This paper will also examine the influence of his Ecotones on his immediate contemporary society.

Mettle of Ecopoetics in Otobotekere's works

Otobotekere's ecopoetics reflects larger social paradigms as he views the ecoproblems belabouring his people from the viewpoint of a sublime soul. His sense of duty combines with his ecological thinking and feelings to generate a site of political resistance. He pours out his life experiences in awesome spectacles of poetic thought that exude the strength, tranquillity and overwhelming beauty of natural scenes. The poet however dwells on the tension springing out by the disturbance and distortion of the natural tranquility and beauty of the landscape by human interference. He portrays the diverse destructive forms unleashed on the ecosystem and the consequent devastation the beautiful landscape in a profound poetic Sublime.

The poet holds poetry to be the means by which humans can assert their connection to the natural world by both literal and literary means. The ecological nature of his poetry makes it not only a tool for change, but a mirror in which we can see reflected the ways we as humans interact, perceive, and respond to our environment. It also reveals something about the desires of a soul who see the imperfections in our present ways and desires above every other thing to change these through working out in words what he feels. His works are therefore a compact body of expressions presented a multitude of poetic forms.

The poet understudy conceives of poetry to be a pathway into the hearth of the environment and possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. He is mostly concerned about the ravages of oil exploration in the Niger Delta that has brought about displacement of indigenes from their ancestral homes. He decries this profligate which assaulted and harmed the natural environment in various ways and to varying degrees, yet wholesome and holistic attributes and attitudes of people of the Niger Delta even as they adapted to major

Given the steadily increasing urgency of environmental problems troubling his immediate surroundings, Christian Otobotekere openly adopts the ecological imperative for public sensitivity and social change. He adopts *Ecopoetics as a weapon for* investigating the complex relationship between the artifice and the natural world. His poems relate to nature as an out pouring of a deep wellspring of meaning. Each

of these poems stand out in their distinct ways expressing the process of rematerializing language through sound effects and other formal devices as a sophisticated response to addressing nature's predicaments. In his collection of poetry, *Beyond Sound and Voice*, the reader first encounters the deep philosophical leanings of a man completely bonded to the nuances of his environment. In *Lake Bird*, he presents the unspoiled beauty of nature:

In the heart of creation
Unfolds a new Eden,
Where, all nature is fresh.
And streams and waters are
Excitingly soft and cool

Where also lilies white
And water lotus sway
In the sweet fanning breeze
And lustre in newest bloom
In nature's own sanctuary. (3)

Seemingly, the Poet King rightfully views the ecology as a macrocosmic home shared by humans and several million other species of living things and inanimate beings in the planet Earth. Thus, his Eco-poetics brings about enlightenment on the means of preserving this home. Still in *Lake Bird*, he avers:

But beware, at the gate
Of the new Eden
Watch out for your toe
As saint snails
The size of tortoise;
The size of ocean turtle,
Are winking and crawling. (4)

Otobotekere's poetry investigates the underlying ecological values and projects such enquiries as to what, precisely, is meant by the word 'nature', and whether the examination of "place" should be a distinctive category in poetry. Much like class, gender or race, he upholds nature as a genre worth expositing. His adoption of an ecophilosophical position with apparent espousal of eco-poetics as a measure of literary value tended to prevail over all other ideological and historical assessment of nature made by any Nigerian poet over the years. His works compliment an epoch of the modifications in eco-poetic genre's representation of nature in the Nigerian literary scene. In *Rural Garden*, the poet once again, demonstrates the elaborate interconnectedness of the world in which we live. In one breath he is chatting on about the intense beauty of a garden in a countryside and the next, he is transported into the world of the singing birds and aural captivation of nature's charm:

Here, melody of thought
And reflex of spiralling echo
Conspire to fling me up
Into the realms far beyond-
Beyond earthly radar.
Beyond sound and voice. (12)

Nature exists in twos for the eco-poetics king. This symbolises the binaries of the union between man and nature. The symbiotic relationship between man and his environment encapsulates the poet in *Twin Birds*. The duality of the relationship between the two birds becomes symbolic of the human existing in an innate environment. He emphasises the prototypical relationship of the birds and its effect on the world around them as unusually pleasant. His use of basic ecology to express nature cannot be over-emphasised:

Even now, look
At the lower horizon

Sweet twin birds
In late afternoon flight,
Spot-lighted by
Mist-impregnated light:

Two medium sized
Wing conspicuous birds
Double flap upon double flap:
Flapping in symmetry, coolly.
A flapping pair in slow motion, tilting beautifully, slowly,
Slowly outward to upward.

Surely, this pair in perfect symmetry
With tinted purple edged wings,
Flapping upon the elemental beauty
Of forest haze into grey mist,
And towards a blue sky
Is well beyond human concept. (13)

The beauty of Otobotekere's ecopoems is made manifest in the rhythmic presentations of his works. The aesthetic ordering of words in '*Songs or Poetry*' catapults the reader into the deepest parts of nature. Here his ecopoetics takes wing as he defines poetry and succinctly establishes the relationship between poetry and nature. The poem begins lyrically, luring the soul into a magical enchantment with words:

The root of thoughtful pleasure
Poetry is.
Music itself is but a blossom
Of that pleasure
Blown live into the air,
Beautiful and coloured
With vocal hues.

Pulsating and throbbing.
With rhyme and rhythm,
A song merely relays
The running melody
On pictorial lines into
Echo- pleased atmosphere (BSV 39)

The Ecopoet king is not only aware of the ecological instability in his contemporary society; he also lays emphasis on the connection between the intrinsic qualities of the human existence and the rest of the inhabitants of the ecosystem. Poetry for him is an intense sensual engagement that involves the entire human senses which only nature can elicit. Otobotekere desperately sharpens our consciousness of precise systematic proof of our own contributions to the devastation of the ecology. The Ecopoet King wants the reader to feel the weight and know the extent of destruction going on around us. In his poem *Wai Universal* taken from the collection *Live 2 Lives* the poet looks at the destruction of the environment:

The meadowland Eden
Of my mother's farm
And tubers, arm's length, abound
Yet unseen by my daughter young
Who, straining skyward...

What of the flowing river?
Your river, my river,

Beauty of beauties now splashy
With concocted chemicals
Of dare-devil youth
Who break the law of the land
Here, there. And upstream, in trial of
Their puny strength
Also no more of
The land -to-river crocodile
Mystically floating
And quietly sinking
By day or by moonlight

What have you done?
With the village- friendly Iguana
Safely sneaking around village dustbins?

When and where again can we see
A fat reptile floating, floating
As easy booty for kids?
Or hippo-kid playing around
At meadow shallows? (52)

In *At Middle Bridge* taken from the collection *Around & About I*, the Ecopoet king draws a parallel between emotion and nature, between the internal and the external realms. He aptly locates the sensory perceptions in the body, and the body in the natural world and asserts that the boundaries between the experiences of the inner body and the outer body are bonded just as man is inextricably bound to his environment. He writes:

At middle bridge
Before my very eyes.
Beauty untold.

What a grace
Of looping distance?
Beauty untold.

Who is my witness?
The sunset,
as never before.

Breathless I gaze-
Gleaming and looping.
Nature's cool mirror.
Beauty untold.

What a beauty
And mercy flow
To give us life support
From rocky-rocky heights (1-22).

The views poetry and life as both emanating from within the body, and standing on the premise of the post-modern realization that the outer workings of the natural world affect the inner workings of the body; he draws a parallelism between poetry and the state of the environment. In this sense, he sees poetry as the most direct means of drawing attention to forces propagating ecological degradations. Poetry becomes for him a strong weapon for tackling persistent and harsh environment in predicaments.

Otobotekere is of the opinion that it is the failure of our species to care for our environment in our interaction with it that has brought us to the current point of crisis in this relationship. In the growing awareness of this crisis. The visual images all the way through the poems, while indicative of the natural world are continually linked with the human element in terms of the physical and the poetic leanings in *Sunflower* taken from his collection, *Around & About*², he x-rays the deep relationship between man and the alluring sunflower in the sky:

The fanciful globe
This evening
Larger than size
Is not just a miracle
Or changing colours.

I cannot now know
Which one dominates
In her blend
Of Western hues.

At the forest's edge,
She is now coolly poised
Much like an orange ripe
Cut open in half,
Slowly sinking-

Slowly sinking, slowly
And half way lost O!
She is now more like a red rose
Cut in half through its middle

... Radiant rosy West!
Fill us with new zest
Happy welcome glow
Shed on us below-
On your near side (13).

The poet believes that music is a universal language that binds together all the children of nature. In *Beach of Beaches* there is a juxtaposition of sounds, music, people, emotions and actions capturing the physical, the mundane and the poetic. This further serves to locate the reader within the poem and make him aware of poetry's connection to the body, while at the same time drawing attention to the connections between the body and the universe.

What a spread out view
Of an Ocean beach?
The atmosphere is alive
With unheard music, toning
Soul and mind
Even so, the receding
Swash of lapping foam
Is caressingly sweet
On my toes
I go lashing the shallows and
Rippling waters.
My eager foot rush through and through
Down the bathing waves (68).

Nonetheless, after determining this interrelation between human, poetic, and physical realms, the eco-poet goes ahead to relate these to the larger world and even transcends into the metaphysical. The progression of the poems moves in such a way that human and their language easily connect to the universe. The poems are self-reflexive in terms of form and content; they typically show an awareness of humans as part of the natural world, and recognize the fact that the natural world is always varying in so many aspects.

This idea assumes that the form of the poems will always be the *author's* response to the content and form blending in the Eco-poetic processes. There is logic imbedded into the form of the poems as well as the contours that are created and the sequence in which the poet reveals his subject.

In *Immortal Sound* he wades into the intrinsic relationship between man and divinity, man and the supernatural, man and the unknown:

Up and down pulling,
He drowns the atmos
With immortal sound,
Thumbing the congregation
Into heavenly lifts
A sound as loud,
Lifted and as clear as
Voice of America (66).

The eco-poet views his works as an x-ray version of his contemporary society. It was almost as if he could x-ray the literals and see the unique detail of nature like a radiologist viewing the bones, muscles, veins and nerves of a live human body. The effect of his poems however surpasses the abstract views of a technical device; it gets down, right down to the extra-sensory perceptions of the reader. Otobotekere constantly reminds his readers that he is a part of the Environment he talks about. In *They all Speak to Me* he writes:

I'm in nature
Or nature in me?
The birds watering their bodies
At rippling shallows,
The air-sizzling cicada
Buzzing at my wall, as well
Beckoning meadow-leaves,
Guarded by standby palms,
Seem to speak to me. (74).

The poet's words hauntingly give his audience a solid grounding of Eco-compositions and Eco-poetics in the milieu he finds himself '...shrubs and thickets, scented primal vegetation (BSV74) are all spontaneous reminiscence of his oneness with his environment. His self-reflexivity and awareness of natural cycles, and the role humans play in them, is exceptional. In *Wai Universal* taken from his collection, *Live 2 Lives*, he demonstrates an awareness of the creative-destructive cycles within the natural world in his portrayal of the destructions of the 'Meadowland of Eden' and desecration of 'the flowing river... with concocted chemicals.' He stresses yet the interconnectedness of life and of the human existence such that the reader is ever aware of the ecological alertness that makes his works more than just a simple nature poem.

Changing events becomes the subject matter of the Eco-poet. Despite the upheavals and trauma imposed upon them by the oil companies the Niger Delta have strong families and cohesive communities that have sustained and continue to sustain them. The poet always strips down nature, its laws and its limits so as to expose the fact that environmental crisis is caused primarily by an eroding and separation of culture from nature. The main reasons lay no doubt in his deep love for nature.

In *Beyond Sound and Voice/Next to Reality*, he equates corruption to, ‘ a wriggling earthworm, salt-resistant or as a wriggling viper at the beak of a bird.’ Through his poems, he investigates the evils of corruption in the country where he severally declared corruption as a ‘ hydra-headed giant, a haughty goliath, a sinister evil that he would slay “ with a sling from/his bag of truth/truth, truth and truth only.”’ This is further buttressed in his collection, *Live 2 Lives* a contribution towards a new social world order hitting corruption pointedly at the head.

He believes that the answer to the country’s problem lies in the redefinition of the relationship between man and God. Religion has been the anchor of his life and as he asserts, ‘ It has always been my re-fuelling station.’ This is portrayed with clarity in the lines below taken from his collection, *Beyond Sound and Voice*:

Nge’ Nge’... .. Nge’
Fancy cries of joy and delight
Boyish form with silk-smooth skin
And nipping tongue
Accepted greetings from all peering.

A new music of faith and hope
Flooded land and river
Stirring simple village folk,
Joy and charity drunk.
Clapping songs, and dance steps
Of old women, sipping and drinking
Welcome the new born-
.....
Boy boy -
How good you are
How well you are
How obedient?

A growing Paul
Not a truant Saul
Not a spoilt son
A faithful Samuel. (33)

Conclusion

This paper has investigated and explore the true essence of the ecotones in the works of Christian Otobotekere. The most alluring aspect of his poetry is his ability to use his poems to ask moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating his readers to live within boundaries that will be binding over generations

The poet’s environmentalist inclinations have succeeded in establishing a lasting presence in the Nigerian literary sphere. For Otobotekere Ecopoetics is a kind of public duty, which he owes to his people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the country especially the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The core essence of this discourse is to prove that Otobotekere’s poetry intersects with the realities of ecological imperialism and as such has come be a volatile, reliable voice in Nigerian literature. His poetic panorama has found its place among this expanding matrix of coexistence between man and natural diversity. His works have become a ready yardstick and guide for determining the Nigerian environmental/ecological experience.

The Ecopoems of Otobotekere are antithetical to the development of capitalism, and predatory individualism in the nation’s polity. Thus, he aims at promoting the maintenance of a people’s natural and ancestral heritages, he has provided and still do provide us with knowledge about our identities, our environment, our history, and our spirituality.

Works Cited

- Bryson J. Scott *Ecopoetry: a Critical Introduction*. (ed) University of Utah Press, 2002.
- Emezue GMT <http://www.shvoong.com/books/poetry/2280415>
- Engelhardt James *The Language Habitat: an Ecopoetry Manifesto*. 2007.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Literary Studies in an age of Environmental crisis", Introduction. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Glotfelty and Fromm (eds.) Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm.. Eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press. 1996.
- Otobotekere Christian. *Across the Bridge-Diadems Forever*. Port Harcourt, Newsfair Publishers, 2002
- Otobotekere Christian. *Around and About book 1*. Port Harcourt, Newsfair Publishers, 2005
- Otobotekere Christian. *Live 2 Lives*. Herodotus Publishers, Port Harcourt, 2009.
- Otobotekere, Christian . *Beyond Sound and Voice*. Port Harcourt: Herodotus Ventures. 2010.
- Oguyade Ogaga. *Eco-Critical literature. Regreening African Landscapes*. New York African Heritage Pres. 2013
- Oyesola, D. (1995). *Essentials of Environmental Crisis: The World and Nigeria in Perspective*. University of Ibadan Press, Ibadan.