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Niger Delta Poetry and Traumatic Inscriptions: A Reading of Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket*

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Abstract

Environmental degradation, beyond being a global phenomenon, is fast becoming a major cause of concern in Africa with severe impacts on humans and non-humans. This mindless exploitation of natural resources, particularly in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, does not only adversely affect aquatic and terrestrial habitats, making them endangered species, but also leaves scathing impacts on humans, which range from physical to psychological. Previous studies have largely focused on analysing the destructive consequences of environmental degradation on non-humans and the effects on the material well-being of humans in Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket*. However, this study argues that the destruction of the environment in the Niger Delta region directly affects the psychological and mental health of the inhabitants in the affected communities, causing trauma. Therefore, this study is a critical reading of Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket* as a narrative of trauma. The study adopts ecocriticism (the study of nature in literature), Stef Craps' model of trauma theory, which redefines trauma to include unending, quotidian kinds of brutality that befall persons in lower factions, and engages Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", which focuses on the accretive, cumulative impact of environmental degradation on marginalised communities. The text is subjected to literary and critical textual analysis to examine its preoccupation with the subject of trauma, through the prisms of individual and collective suffering among the Niger Delta people. The study establishes that environmental degradation possesses the potential to generate trauma.

Keywords: Environmental Degradation, Trauma, Sophia Obi, Slow Violence, Niger Delta Poetry

Introduction

The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region and the resultant environmental degradation have made traumatic experiences the stark reality of the Niger Delta people. Thus, oil has

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become a metaphor of pain for the people since its discovery and exploitation over six decades ago in the region. This exploitation is carried out by multinational corporations alongside the Nigerian government – formidable forces (who are driven by an insatiable quest for material wealth beyond reasonable limits). As a result, the Niger Delta history is marked by traumatic dispossession, displacement and deprivation, which has led to the emergence of an "… enduring Literature dramatising the horrible condition of human beings in the region, just as the trauma of the civil war generated the Civil War Literature …" (Maduka, 2013, p. 79) This degradation of the environment comes with severe repercussions on the inhabitants, as the destruction not only negatively affects their physical and material lives but also their psychological well-being, causing trauma.

Existing studies have examined the effects of environmental degradation on the Niger Delta environment, as represented in Niger Delta poetry. These studies have largely focused on the eco-conscious nature of Niger Delta poetry, which has been registered through their thematic preoccupations and stylistic engagements. Usanga (2018) refers to Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* as songs of eco-engagements, as it draws attention to the appalling exploitation of the Delta. Eco-abuse, marginalisation, environmental degeneration, amongst others, have been examined in Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (Trinya, 2011; Okunoye, 2008; Stephen, 2017). Ohwavworhua & Orhero (2019) focus on man's resistance and remonstration against environmental deterioration in Nnimmo Bassey's *I Will Not Dance To Your Beat* and Albert Otto's *Letters from the Earth*. Specifically, Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket* and *Floating Snags* have been said to consist of poems that deal with environmental difficulties in the Niger Delta region, in addition to the historical as well as socio-political features that characterise the ecological reality (Onyema, 2011). Onyema also maintains that Obi alongside Brown and Umez employs linguistic choices that are intended to arrive at positive environmental awareness, particularly, as it impinges on the difficulties confronting the ecology as a result of the exploration of oil in the Niger Delta. Thus, they deploy their poems as a medium to gain people's awareness as regards the ecological difficulties belabouring the Niger Delta where human, earthly and marine creatures are eliminated in such a way that results in the deaths of biotic creatures or massive migration to other land and water habitats.

Similarly, Ukagu (2022) believes that Sophia Obi's maiden collection, *Tears in a Basket*, increases awareness on the diverse quandaries engendered by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta region. In sum, Onyema (2011) avers that Niger Delta writers advocate for the creation of some form of awareness of the physical aftermaths of environment degradation. Despite the scholarly attention given to the work of Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket* and others from the Niger Delta, and the increasing concern about the psychological impacts of environmental devastation, adequate attention has not been paid to the trauma that accompanies ecological ruptures. Therefore, this paper examines trauma as a corollary of environmental degradation in Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket*, with a view to identifying the various manifestations of trauma and the tropes utilised in foregrounding trauma. Also, ecocriticism, Stef Craps' model

of trauma theory and Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" are used as guides for the analysis because of their relevance to the study of the environment, trauma and incremental violence. Besides, the study adopted the interpretive design, as poems are interpreted from both literal and metaphorical perspectives. The purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting eco-conscious poems with particular characteristics related to the subject of trauma in Obi's *Tears in a Basket*. Lastly, the study is a qualitative research, which focuses on close reading and critical study of the text – a technique of literary analysis.

Ecocriticism, the study of nature in Literature, was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Rueckert (1978, p. 71) succinctly defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature", while Buell (1995, p. 430) describes ecocriticism as "as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis". Similarly, Glotfelty (1996, p. xix) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies". Fundamentally, ecocriticism deals with the interaction between nonhuman and human as represented in literature while de-emphasising the domination of man over nature, decentering the primacy of humanity over other life forms, and reconstructing conceptualisations of man. Therefore, ecocriticism is a theory that emerged as a reaction to anthropocentric attitudes and domination of nature by man. Simply put, ecocriticism "gives emphasis on this eco-consciousness removing the ego-consciousness man" (Mishra, 2016, p. 168) because the logic of domination is associated with discrimination and subjugation. Since the publication of Rueckert's work, ecocriticism, as an emergent movement, has gained popularity within the field of literary studies and has become an interpretive tool for analysing ecologically-related writings.

On the other hand, trauma theory emerged in literary studies in the 1990s. In simple terms, trauma is defined as a wound. A wound has been described by Balogun (2011) as a bearer of that which is off-putting, distinguished by pains. In medical and psychiatric terms and, particularly, Freud's text, trauma is described as an injury perpetrated not on the body but on the psyche (Caruth, 1996). Caruth states further that Freud's emphasis on the "wound of the mind" denotes the "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world", which is not similar to "the wound of the body, a simple and healable event" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Earlier, Caruth (1991, p. 181) also acknowledges that "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena". Balaev (2014) believes that trauma studies in literary criticism began attracting noteworthy attention in 1996 with Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and Kali

Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma.* Since the inception of the concept of trauma, a lot of conflicting theories and numerous controversial arguments have been recorded, amongst which is Stef Craps' model of trauma theory. Stef Craps is one of the revisionists of trauma theory whose model is deployed for this research.

Stef Craps' trauma theory is anchored on the inclusion of quotidian kinds of brutality that happen to groups of lower factions, as he also advocates for a comprehensive delineation of trauma contrary to the restricted dominant descriptions of trauma and traumatic occurrences. Craps (2013) criticises the dominant delineations of trauma, which he asserts are culturally unsympathetic and ostracising, and critiques the uncritical cross-cultural employment of trauma ideas that are Western to international (non-Western) contexts in humanitarian catastrophe alleviation programmes. He avers that the hegemonic notions of trauma as well as recovery have to be reviewed and extended if it is to effectively cater for the ignored psychological hurt experienced by several disempowered factions. Earlier on, Craps (2010) states that it is imperative to enlarge the perception of trauma from unexpected disastrous occurrences that befall persons in socially controlling capacities to include unending, quotidian kinds of brutality and subjugation having impact on lower factions. However, earlier trauma theorists kept holding to the conventional event-based representation of trauma, which states that trauma arises from a sole, unexpected, disastrous event. By implication, the traumatic effect of racism and other types of current subjugation cannot be sufficiently treated within the theoretical structures provided by trauma; hence, Craps advocates a review of the definition.

Nixon (2011, p. 2) defines slow violence as "… a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all". In the same way, Rothberg (2014) states that considering the destruction carried out through human-caused climate alteration, as well as environmental destruction, trauma necessitates a shift past event-centred tales of brutality, as Nixon proposes with his notion of 'slow violence'. Nixon (2011, p. 2) contends that we have to understand "a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales", to comprehend the effect of environmental catastrophe on the ecology of world's poor, that is, those same persons who are directly and severely influenced by the neoliberal government of accumulation. This 'violence of delayed destruction,' an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' also ends up, as Rothberg (2014) puts it, in additional recognisable or 'visible' kinds of trauma such as wars and immediate ('natural') disasters.

Poetic Narrations of Trauma in Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket*

It is this incremental violence experienced by the Niger Delta people that Sophia Obi articulates through her collection, *Tears in a Basket*. Sophia Obi is a female eco-conscious voice on the eco-literary scene, who voices her concern about the catastrophe meted on the Niger Delta

region, which puts the existence of the people in question. Obi verbalises her people's hurt despite the succinct descriptions and sparseness of poems in *Tears in a Basket* (*Tears*), which cater to the subject of trauma as a by-product of environmental degradation. The collection is divided into two sections. However, the study focuses on the first section, where some of the poems address environmental devastation. Through these poems, Obi not only gives a voice to the traumatised but also reinforces the testimonial potency of literature (poetry) to trauma while advocating environmental justice. The poet gives an account of a history of violence and repeated exposure to environmental degradation, which leaves in its wake a devastated environment and traumatised people whose continual tears have yielded no significant result. This is concisely captured through the title of the anthology, "*Tears in a Basket*".

The trauma of the Niger Delta people does not arise from a single unforeseen disastrous event like Caruth (1996) would want us to believe in her conception of trauma; rather, it is a progressively unending event (ecological destruction) that leaves in its process devastating traumatic implications. Although the trauma is not engineered by a sole destructive incident, it does not make it less hurtful because, as Kaplan (2016) argues, pain cannot be quantified and compared. In the opening poem, entitled "Tomorrow's debris" (*Tears,* 12), the linguistic choices paint a picture of a troubled humanity. Here, the poet persona, overwhelmed by sorrow, chronicles the tale of repeated destruction meted out on the environment by "wolves/ who wine and dine on the toil/of the weak and wasted" (*Tears,* 12). These are the multinational corporations as well as the conniving government authorities, who in further cahoots with the local allies, display animalistic actions, which earn them the metaphorical representation of "wolves". Typical of wolves, they feast on the feeble.

Unfortunately, the poet persona recognises the presence of these wolves (plunderers), yet she is incapable of resisting their atrocious activities like the Niger Delta people who are unable to oppose the despoilers. This confirms their powerlessness and feeling of helplessness. In the above lines, while the animal metaphor emphasises the cruelty of the plunderers' brutality, the use of pun and alliteration is intentional, as the pun seeks to cushion the intensity of pain projected by the mental picture which the alliterative verse has drawn the reader's attention to. More so, the poet persona is tormented by the "wailing of thirsting souls" stemming from "battered thatches" who "… till and toil" (*Tears,* 12) with no rewarding gain. The torturous memories underscore the fact that survivors of the region's crisis are constantly tormented by resonances of imaginary wails of their comrades. Besides, the terrestrial and aquatic habitats are not exempted as "the soil and rivers mourn/heavy with the weight of the dead" (*Tears,* 12). The extract appeals to the senses of the reader through the deployment of personification in vividly describing the situation. Moreover, this incident of aquatic habitats housing the dead traumatises the earth because of the burden of decomposing humans, and "a traumatised earth begets traumatised people" (Narine, 2015, p. 13) owing to the symbiotic connection. This can be explained further thus: "nature does not merely visit our own violence back upon

us, but rather forces us to confront our own propensity to inflict the traumas to which ecological degradation … bears witness" (Narine, 2015, p. 13) In essence, the people of the Niger Delta region become traumatised by their own actions or the actions of others (despoilers). To make it worse:

> … orphans bury their agony
> in their baffled hearts
> their screams, sharp as the missiles
> that torment them day and night
> erode their plastic smiles (*Tears,* 12)

People whom society considers minors, and as a consequence, should be protected from the travails of the world, are not immune from life's contingencies. They lose their parents to the massive destruction of the environment and are deprived of grieving their dead. Rather, they conceal their loss and anguish in their bewildered hearts, incapable of fully comprehending their loss but stricken by the vacuum created. Many times, in the absence of mourning, relief becomes unattainable because "experts believe that if you do not grieve at the time of death, or shortly after, the grief may stay bottled up inside you" (The South African Depression and Anxiety Group). Little wonder the children experience consistent torments, which slowly wear away their outward appearance of wholesomeness, and this hurts "like a heartless bullet/ rips apart their very existence" (*Tears,* 12). The shattering of almost every component of the orphans' existence, owing to the magnitude of their losses, figuratively emphasises their hopeless state. Besides, the disappearance of caregivers is a common feature in the Niger Delta region, which is described in the poem as "the infinite wail of orphans/echoes in search of dispatched parents" (*Tears,* 12) at fishing harbours, towns as well as forests. The aged, on the other hand, cling "to the shovel of hope" (*Tears,* 12), symbolising consolation and fleeting soothing relief, as they "dig into the depths of their minds" (*Tears,* 12), suggesting the onset of depression. In succeeding lines, it appears like the survivors of several bouts of ecological barrage gain victory, but it is only a "painful survival", with the orphans wailing "their endless agony/among tomorrow's debris" (*Tears,* 12). Their victory, in this context, is not of final conquest or defeat of the oppressors, but of eventual survival after the wreckage. Also, the orphans bewailing their unending agony among "tomorrow's debris" (*Tears,* 12) confirms the fact that the trauma experienced by the Niger Delta people stems from an ongoing event, which possesses present repercussions as well as futuristic shocks – "incremental and accretive" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2) violence. Hence, the people are made to deal with a present fear owing to a degraded land and future anxiety of a shrinking world subjected to consistent flames from undue engagement of humans with the environment.

Similarly, in the poem titled "Oloibiri" (*Tears*, 13) the poet persona is dejected and mentally tortured by the agonising irony that characterises her life and her people's, which is occasioned by the belated imaginary freedom because the dividends of freedom are mere platitudes

without privileges. The poem is titled after the name of a community in the Niger Delta region, Oloibiri in Bayelsa State, where oil was said to have been first discovered in large quantity in 1956. The poet, Obi, also happens to hail from this community, which might in a way, lend credence to the facts recollected in her poetry collection. This community that once led the path to Nigeria's wealth, unfortunately, has become abandoned and forgotten, after much exploration and exploitation of oil over the years, with no trace of her mineral-rich past. This abandonment provided the natives of the community with some sort of freedom from the despoilers, since at last they could lay claim to their environment. However, it is only a sour taste of freedom, which might make them free from servitude but

> Desolate like a wealthy aged whore
> Wrapped up in gloomy attire,
> I lay on the altar of a faded glory,
> Oily tears rolling through my veins (*Tears,* 13)

Filled with imagery, the poem describes the supposed freedom gained after compound wreckages. The image of a "wealthy aged whore" (*Tears,* 13) presents a mental picture of Oloibiri, by extension the Niger Delta region, which echoes of expansive exploitation, before being dumped on "the altar of a faded glory" (*Tears,* 13) by the despoilers. In addition, the desolation and desertion that accompany the destruction of the environment, which is compared to that of an abandoned old slattern, emphasises the state of gloom that pervades the land. The poem further describes the aforementioned freedom as "the coated freedom of torment/ When anguish enfolds joy" (*Tears,* 13). This implies that their freedom is enshrouded in torture and their happiness draped in agony, such that life cannot return to normalcy after the devastation. The pain of loss metamorphoses into intrusive thoughts as the poet persona relives memories of the past, which keep afflicting her mind thus:

> I hear the echo of years gone by
> In my vicinity, there is the quake of discovery
> A zebra string of pipelines running
> Through my belly,
> Causing me to ache from relentless exploitation. (*Tears*, 13)

The poet persona and her people are psychologically tormented by the thoughts of the loss of their near pristine land following the discovery and exploitation of oil in Oloibiri, which leaves only vestiges of the past in the aftermath of the destruction. The meditations on the past trigger some fear about the present and anxiety about the future. The above excerpt suggests the magnitude of environmental destruction due to eco-abuse. The "string of pipelines running/ Through my belly/Causing… ache" (*Tears*, 13) implies the adverse effects that the placement of conduits has had on the ecosystem and surrounding habitats. Many times, these conduits experience leakages or spills, which could adversely impact the health of the people of the affected communities. This corroborates Ordinioha & Brisibe (2013, p. 14) view that "… oil

spills in the Niger delta have acute and long-term effects on human health". Apparently, the munificence of the land "hangs" the people of Oloibiri "on the scale of extinction" (*Tears*, 13) owing to the destructive impact of man's exploitative activities on the earth. This confirms that the people of the Niger Delta are endangered species. Consequently, they live in fear of a future dreadful episode–extinction, which Kaplan (2016) refers to as "pretrauma".

Despite foreboding environmental catastrophes that the destruction of the environment portends, the multinational conglomerates together with the government leaders (both local and national) do not put definite measures in place to curb the menace and engender environmental remediation. Instead, they keep postponing the day of doom for posterity to reap. Nixon (2011) substantiates this further:

> Many politicians—and indeed many voters—routinely treat environmental action as critical yet not urgent. And so generation after generation of two- or four-year cycle politicians add to the pileup of deferrable actions deferred. With rare exceptions, in the domain of slow violence "yes, but not now, not yet" becomes the modus operandi. How can leaders be goaded to avert catastrophe when the political rewards of their actions will not accrue to them but will be reaped on someone else's watch decades, even centuries, from now? (9)

Consequently, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region, in their agitated state, struggle to "… survive the torment" (*Tears*, 14), while dealing with the anguish that comes with enriching others and impoverishing self. In what seems like an epiphanic moment, the poet persona suddenly soliloquises:

> O, I have lived a grey life of despair
> Now with my fertility gone,
> I carry a begging bowl
> Unable to form a sovereign body to build
> A monument to my forsaken glory (*Tears*, 14)

The above excerpt vividly recounts the tale of the Niger Delta region and her inhabitants. It tells a profound story of the loss of a magnificent haven, which led to depressive state for the victims. This concomitant depression corresponds with Albrecht's (2005, p. 48) description of solastalgia as "the specific form of melancholia connected to lack of solace and intense desolation". In other words, the people of the Niger Delta region experience solastalgia following the destruction of their environment, which formerly engendered fecundity and provided comfort. Besides, sterility, in terms of body physiology and land productivity, becomes the order of the day with an overwhelming presence of destitution. In essence, the pollution of the environment and the exploitation of resources jeopardise human fertility as well as land fecundity. In the closing lines of the poem, the poet persona, consumed possibly in thoughts, is suddenly awakened to consciousness by the tears of her nation, Ijaw. Next, she hears the

merriment, happiness and "joyful uproar", which "comes/With controlling the blessings/Of my God-given inheritance" (*Tears*, 14). However, the reality of the people contradicts the fantasy of the poet persona because the people of the region are yet to gain control over their God-given endowments, if they ever will. Nevertheless, her cognitive dissonance makes her hear "joyful uproar". Traumatic situations engender "fantasy proneness (FP)", which has been described as the "tendency to immersion in imagination … linked to psychopathology and suggested to be a maladaptive coping strategy" (Bacon & Charlesford, 2018, p. 2). Even the oxymoron in "joyful uproar" underscores the presence of an illusion. Thus, the poet persona experiences "fantasy proneness" that, perhaps, provides momentary relief while the Ijaw nation, which is a synecdoche of the Niger Delta region, still grieves over the recurring bouts of ruination.

As the Niger Delta environment grieves, so also do humans because of the intrinsic relationship. This is the land that assists the people in negotiating shelter, income and sustenance. Nixon (2011) confirms this: "[s]ubsistence farming and fishing are the mainstays of these delta communities, yet they have received no compensation for the devastation of resources on which they utterly depend" (108). Certainly, the depletion of the resources of the environment means a decline in the quality of life and living standards for the people because earth's basic life support systems are damaged. Yet, do the plunderers put measures in place to constrain themselves from excessive and unmindful exploitation? Do they also provide means for compensating the natives in the event of any undue usage of the land? Although the region paved the way to wealth for the nation, the visceral pain of indigence cuts so deep for its indigenes. The poem entitled "Swamps of our time" (*Tears*, 18) describes this ironical scenario, where "with the milk of her breast/she moulds dusty earth into mansions". Nonetheless, "her children peep through tattered huts" (*Tears*, 18), owing to destitution and desertion. Disquieted by the condition of the environment, the poet persona asks:

> O' delta of our beginnings, how has the past left you?
> How is the present treating you?
> What is the future of your ecosystem?
> Can you turn back the swamps of time? (*Tears*, 18)

The poet persona struggles with multiple unanswered questions demonstrated through rhetorical questions, which possess the potential to engender mental breakdown. The answers to the rhetorical questions are evident with the poet persona's nostalgic wish for the past, which only a disappointing present could induce. It is this current troubled state of the environment in the Niger Delta region that makes the poet persona desire a return to the beginning of times, when the environment was in its near pristine state. Almost immediately, the poet persona realises that a rewind of history is nearly impossible, and she concludes the poem with a threnodic tenor: "Niger Delta, like my mother's soul/grieves for her children who give bountifully/Yet feed on remnants" (*Tears*, 18).

Tears in a Basket is a revelatory text and an expressive testimonial to the experiences of the Niger Delta people, who have been sacrificed on the altar of greed by a conglomerate of oppressors. This is further recounted in the titular poem "Tears in a basket", where the poet persona does not fail to indict the local representatives for the roles played in environmental damage. In the opening lines of "Tears in a basket" (*Tears,* 19), the intermittent repetitions (refrain) of "*[w]e are the sacrificial leeches/waiting to be squashed*", draw attention to the status of the Niger Delta populace whose future has been merchandised by their sabotaging forefathers. The metaphorical comparison of the people to a parasitic creature suggests the ironical twist their lives have taken. These people, who were once possessors of wealth, have become parasites leaving off the miserly resources fed them by the despoilers. Besides, the metaphoric titling of the poem, "Tears in a basket", underscores the hopeless situation introduced by the loss of land. This burden of loss is overwhelming to the extent that the poet persona confesses:

> Winds of bitter memory slap me silly…
> Naked dances and dreams have been dampened…
> Drunk with anxiety,
> I flip through the memoirs
> Of our ancestors…
> Who, unceremoniously, gave our fate away
> On a stained platter of gold (*Tears*, 19)

Rather than save the future of generations of the Niger Delta region, greed made the forebearers blind drunk to form an alliance with the pillagers and aid the destruction of their territory, leaving posterity to reap the proceeds. This shocking and painful revelation subjects the poet persona to psychic torture and overwhelming anxiety. Also, the painful realisation of crushed dreams owing to neglect, and "communal disorder" (*Tears*, 19) engineered by their forefathers, leave the poet persona devastated. Presently, "only the deep scars of memory/ wrapped in cobwebs of pain" are the vestiges that "bind us to mother earth" (*Tears*, 19). What could be more descriptive of a devastated state? The unfathomable emotional sore stemming from recollections, enshrouded in webs of ache, confirms the presence of trauma, since trauma has been simply defined as an injury to the psyche. Also, the distraught state of the poet persona is a prototype of her people's plight. With their current status as "sacrificial leeches", the poet persona ponders:

> How do we think
> When our thoughts are images lost in muddy streams,
> Dangling on hooks that mock our existence?
> How can we sing
> When our folksongs are distorted grunts
> Raking up our sorrowing lungs? (*Tears*, 19)

The linguistic choices of the poet demonstrate the psychological impacts of endless agony owing to the destruction of the most cherished treasure of the people, the environment. Regrettably, the possibility of dealing with trauma and accessing healing is strangled, because even the people's folksongs which are supposed to serve this purpose, have become warped murmurs and as a result, have lost their remedial potentials. Songs are said to be one of the means by which Africans cope with and work through pain. This assertion supports Craps' (2013) recognition of alternative or multiple means of recovery, rather than the hegemonic Western notions proposed. Unfortunately, the indispensable role of folksongs is displaced in the Niger Delta region as the existence of the people is sorrow-laced, with "plastic joy" concealing their pains. This establishes Kaplan's (2005) view that when the emblematic organisation within which human beings exist as well as make meaning of their lives is destroyed, it brings about demoralising consequences. Thus, the last thread of hope is seemingly lost as the poem ends on a bleak note with the poet persona reiterating; "*We are sacrificial leeches/ waiting to be squashed*" (*Tears*, 19, italics in original).

"Regrets" (*Tears,* 20) is a sequel to the eponymous poem "Tears in a basket". Similar to the preceding poem, the poet persona continues expressing regrets over the vending of their future by their precursors. The poet persona engages a multisensory presentation of this traumatic merchandise, a tendency that recalls Pederson's notion of the trauma victims' inclination to chronicle not only optical clues but also "aural, olfactory, tactile and gustatory ones" (2014, p. 339). This is vocalised in the opening lines of the poem:

> I can hear the cacophonic laughter
> I can see the peering eyes of gossip
> I can feel the anger of our frailty haunting us (*Tears*, 20)

The presentation of sensory details appeals to our senses, and helps in engaging our sensory organs (touch, sight and hearing) in feeling the hurt experienced by a disturbed personality. This hurt is accentuated through multisensory bodily response, which doubles as multi-vocal chords. In other words, there is an obvious intense reliance on sensory details to express the depth of hurt as the Niger Delta region has become a laughingstock to the plunderers, and a subject of discussion for gossipmongers. Thus, the poet persona is consumed with an intense sense of collective guilt over the destruction of their future, which she underscores in the line: "We've strangled our destiny" (*Tears*, 20). As the poet persona does not seek to exonerate herself from the crime committed against the environment through the use of the first-person pronoun (plural), "we", so also does she draw the reader's attention to the role(s), perhaps, he/she might have played in promoting this quandary. As a result of this impasse, the people are "overfed with hunger/…bloated with sorrow" and have become "strangers in our world" (*Tears*, 20). The images represented in the poem foreground the presence of starvation (extreme hunger) and deep distress. In essence, the Niger Delta people not only suffer severe repercussions of impoverishment but also experience a distressing emotional state as well as

the dilemma of estrangement, precisely because their identity is empathetically tied to the environment. The dilemma of estrangement is associated with the diagnosis of solastalgia, which "is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation" (Albrecht, 2005, p. 48). He further asserts that it "… is the direct experience of transformation or destruction of the physical environment (home) by forces that undermine a personal and community sense of identity and control" (2005, p. 49).

This study's focus on trauma corroborates Nixon's (2011) conception of "slow violence", which is in tandem with Craps' (2013) criticism against the universal validity of Western definitions and application of trauma. This is based on the fact that the nature of trauma evident in the Niger Delta region is a stealthily ongoing violence, and this is represented in the poem titled "Mama's winning colours" (*Tears*, 24) with "Mama" referring to mother Earth. Unfortunately, "the representational bias against slow violence has, furthermore, a critically dangerous impact on what counts as a casualty in the first place. Casualties of slow violence—human and environmental—are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted" (Nixon, 2011, p. 13). Nixon's assertion, possibly, accounts for the reason the violence perpetrated against the Niger Delta aboriginals is overlooked. The poem, "Mama's winning colours", addresses an environment undergoing "slow violence", as the poet persona recounts the regressive state into which the earth and the people alike have been subjected. This is occasioned by the daily exploitation of their environment without any compensatory benefits as outlined in the following lines:

> I have asked for the basic fabrics of amenities…
> You tear my heart to shreds
> With this fat attitude of yours
> Imagine the clumsy network of electric lines
> Roads bare of drainage (*Tears*, 24)

In addition to the historically degraded community is a distressed region devoid of basic amenities and fraught with substandard connections and services. In other words, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region do not only contend with attritional attacks on its environment, they are also denied essential infrastructural facilities, which validates Nixon's (2011) view that affected communities oftentimes struggle against corrosive violation of their lands, as well as denial to contemporary necessary infrastructural amenities that could provide options to escape indigence. The sarcasm in "fat attitude" is deliberate as the poet persona amplifies the characteristics of the plunderers, with the successive lines confirming this. Painfully, the poet persona watches her land "regress from year to year" and marvels if "…green still stands for productivity?/White, purity? and green again for prosperity?" (*Tears,* 24) This retrogressive metamorphosis of the land that the poet persona as well as the Niger Delta people are compulsorily made to experience possesses traumatic potentials. The intrusive thoughts conjure

nostalgic memories of the past where the greenness of the environment once announced productivity and prosperity. Sadly, this is not the condition of the environment again, which is now only green around the gills. Furthermore, the poet persona's impotence in the face of the regression of her land tortures her, and this is a vivid illustration of the Niger Delta people's condition. They bear witness to the destruction of their communities but are incapable of preventing the degradation. Also, the deployment of rhetorical questions and dejected tone provide some cues to the poet persona's distressed condition. This distress is triggered by "solastalgia", which means "the distress caused by the transformation and degradation of one's home environment" (Galway, Beery, Jones-Casey, & Tasala, 2019, p. 1). The absence of "Mama winning colours" (white and green) draws attention to the loss of the fecundity, immaculacy and richness of their land due to the advent and exploitation of the Niger Delta area by the oil multinationals.

Indeed, the contact between the Niger Delta region and multinational conglomerates, which left the denizens of the region traumatised, is a result of the expropriation and exploitation of their land and resources. The encroaching group (oil multinationals) saw the region as a place to plunder and not to plough, which informed their disposition and activities. Sharing similar sentiments, Kaplan (2005) states that a relationship gets disquieting once, for instance, an encroaching group resolves only on appropriating the aboriginals' environment as well as resources. In such a situation, the encroachment, she argues, never leaves the natives the same; rather, it wreaks havoc on the host community. The Niger Delta community epitomises this situation as recounted in the poem entitled "Consolation" (*Tears*, 31):

> I still wear this grey apparel…
> his death fetched me…
> by foes who feasted
> on the booty
> of his greenish harvest (*Tears*, 31)

Years after the long-sought freedom from oil exploitation or the abandonment of some areas after excessive abuse by the despoilers, many communities in the region are yet to recover. They still carry the burden of despoliation, with the environment's deplorable state and the people's pathetic conditions testifying to it. As these harrowing memories flood her mind, the poet persona finds comfort simply from the "…remnants of his love and laughter" that "echo in my heart" (*Tears*, 31), which provides some sort of closure from her grief. Metaphorically, the bits and pieces of environmental nostalgia of her once pristine land, provide succour for the poet persona's forlorn condition. However, the titling of the poem "Consolation" still confirms the presence of pain and loss because, in the absence of distress, there would be no need for consolation.

This psychical pain that accompanies the destruction of the environment confirms the fact that an event does not have to inflict bodily injury on the victim for it to be traumatic. Researchers

in the field of trauma concur that a traumatic experience must not necessarily involve physical hurt, as it is not often physical for the majority of people who survive it (Adebiyi-Adelabu & Aguele, 2017). The history of the Niger Delta region evokes a picture where some people, who did not sustain physical injury from the compound wreckages visited on their environment, groan from psychic hurt. "A taste of tomorrow" (*Tears*, 45) gives a foretaste of this emotionally scarred humanity, typified by the poet persona's hysterical state. She is seriously haunted by "[m]emories" that are "rusty as fossilized rod" because she "… paid her dues in borrowed coins" (*Tears*, 45), which in popular idiom is referred to as "robbing Peter to pay Paul". This explains the region's dilemma where their leaders trade away their tomorrow for today's gain. Consequently, the people groan under constant distress. This distress metamorphoses into haunting memories that keep the poet persona in a frenzied state, which is captured in the lines below:

> Yet, as time throws its
> blanket over the skies
> I toss and turn on my tired bed,
> sleep miles and miles away from me.
>
> O memory,
> do not burn the cells of my mind
> in the smithy of forgotten pain (*Tears,* 45)

The disturbing thoughts plague the poet persona's mind, leading to anxiety and sleep deprivation as she struggles with insomnia, a development that suggests a condition of mental disequilibrium, and "[d]epression and anxiety are the most potent factors that affect and disequilibrate the mental health status and also cause many comorbidities" (Mariam, 2022, p. i). The tranquility and rest after exertion from the day's work which comes with nightfall is beyond her reach because the poet persona loses sleep, and subsequently, experiences a psychological breakdown owing to mental pictures of devastation. In other words, she experiences a state of sheer sleeplessness, while terrifying memories severely torment her to the extent that she pleads for ease and cries out "[s]ave me, O save me/from this ache of a bitter history" (*Tears*, 45). The deployment of apostrophe draws the reader's attention to the magnitude of pain the Niger Delta populace undergoes. However, the poem does not only seek to evoke sympathy from the reader but also pursues intervention to salvage the situation. The poet persona seems to be haunted by the loss of her near virginal environment as well as memories of the past mistakes committed by their forbears, which Kaplan (2005) describes as a form of "unconscious vicarious trauma" (106). Therefore, it only makes sense for the poet persona to anticipate a better tomorrow, which she expresses as the "fresh egg I feel on my tongue" and "the welcome taste of tomorrow" (*Tears*, 45). Although the tomorrow of bliss never seems to come, nurturing hope while confronting despair probably brings about some remedial, of fleeting effect.

Certainly, the effect is only fleeting because in the succeeding poem, the poet persona relapses into anxiety – a pretraumatic state. This anxiety, "a kind of pretrauma or anticipatory anxiety" (Kaplan, 2016, p. 54), is symptomatic of a distraught personality. Hence, the poet persona experiences pretrauma, and fear spreads through her being as a result of an already imagined terrifying impending disaster, possibly global warming or threat of extinction, occasioned by current environmental degradation in her society. This is inscribed in the poem titled "Resolve" (*Tears*, 46). In a moment of interior monologue, the poet persona's pretraumatic state, which is a result of severe anxiety, is revealed:

> I am sitting on the edge of anxiety…
> I am gazing into the mist of tomorrow
> Blurred and shapeless,
> images spring into the
> black void of my eye
> holding no answers for the million questions… (*Tears*, 46)

The pretrauma that bedevils the poet persona is expressed through her current extremely anxious state as she looks into the bleak future. In addition, she is troubled over myriads of unanswered questions concerning what the future holds for her region in general, and her community in particular. This is owing to the fact that "[w]e are heading toward a multipolar global order that will depend for its survival on belated—and therefore evermore desperate—responses to uncertain petroleum reserves and mounting climate change" (Nixon, 2011, p. 68). Consequently, the poet persona is already "[t]ormented by thoughts of the future" (*Tears*, 46). Yet, she decides on momentary relief as she resolves "… to live today for what it's worth" and "paint Judas in lighter colours" (*Tears*, 46). The deployment of Biblical allusion is aptly thought-out, as it underscores the attitudes of the local leaders of the Niger Delta who betrayed their people for immediate selfish satisfaction, similar to Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Besides, the poet persona finds religion as an escapist route and soothing respite for her disturbed mind, which Karl Marx avers is the "opium of the masses." This is demonstrated in the concluding part of the poem: "[a]nd with your eternal lamp in my hands, Lord/my path is forever bright" (*Tears,* 45).

Obi translates the pains (trauma) experienced by her and the people, generated by ongoing environment devastation, into words (poetry), and it becomes an outlet for working through trauma - an act of winning with words. This corresponds to Adebiyi-Adelabu's (2021, p. 16) statement that "…since pains triggered by a traumatic experience often recur, one of the ways by which to overcome them is to imaginatively write about them…" This statement foregrounds the expressive theory of art. Similarly, he corroborates this view further that "[i]n recent times, writing about disease or distressing experiences is increasingly being embraced as a means for overcoming or mitigating the effects of illness and difficult experiences, despite the fact that many scientists and mainstream medical practitioners have been skeptical about the benefits of these approaches" (Adebiyi-Adelabu, 2024, p. 2). Besides, writing is crucial to the protest

against environmental injustice and its devastating consequences because "… writing as scripted obliteration—remains pivotal to the struggles that animate environmental justice movements around the world; central, too, to the author-activists who have written back against the tendency to inscribe whole socioecological communities as superfluous, as primitive obstacles to development, or as nonexistent" (Nixon, 2011, p. 95).

Conclusion

The poems in Obi's *Tears in a Basket* are predominantly occupied with palpable constellations of traumatic experiences generated from the degraded landscapes, as they establish the intricate relationship between environmental degradation and trauma through their retrospective narratives. The study validates the fact that the discovery of oil and the mindless exploitation resulted in degradation in many forms with dramatic consequences on the psychological and mental health of the Niger Delta inhabitants. In other words, the degradation of the environment not only affects the physical existence of the aboriginal population but also their psychological being, causing trauma, an outgrowth of environmental degradation. Therefore, the anthology inscribes environmental degradation as a stealthily ongoing trauma-inducing disaster in the region, and poetry becomes a suitable medium for relating such traumatic experiences because trauma can be expressed through defying language, which is often literary (Caruth, 1996). This is a distinctive feature of poetry.

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