

# OLD CHANTS, NEW VOICES: AN ECO-FEMINIST READING OF E.E. SULE'S WHAT THE SEA TOLD ME

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## ABSTRACT

*In What the Sea Told Me, E. E. Sule, like other poets from Nigeria who have made the decision to interrogate critical issues from an eco-perspective, combines personal agitations with public matters as he decries the historical abuse of Africa's natural resources and the deleterious effects on the people. The bond between the poet and nature enables the expression of a radical resistance against the socio-political injustices suffered by Africans and to call for an end to the exploitative degradation of the environment that is detrimental to the interests of masses. In the poems that make up the collection, the sea occupies a central position; it is both a backdrop for the poet's musings and explorations of the themes of inspiration, seduction, exploitation, and resistance, as well as a character that is invested with "feminine" qualities. However, the way gender is employed in the poems depicts a*

## Introduction:

What the Sea Told Me (2009) is E. E. Sule's third volume of poetry. Previously, he had published two other well received collections of poetry, Knifing Tongues (2005) and Naked Sun (2006), and was also awarded the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize for his novel Sterile Sky (2012). However, it is in this third collection which was bestowed the ANA/NDDC Gabriel Okara Poetry Prize and the AWF/Anthony Agbo Prize that Sule's poetic voice rings out most clearly. In it, nature plays a prominent role both as the background against which actions and



*patriarchal sensibility that prejudices the revolutionary message that Sule strives to impart. In the following analysis of selected poems, ecofeminist criticism is adopted in order to probe the relationship between the poet and nature and to examine the view of women that emerges out of the representational strategies that are adopted.*

*Keywords: Nature, Ecopoetry, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Patriarchy*

Events unfold and also as characters involved in the issues at stake. Inspired by the seas, mountains, and vegetation as well as natural elements such the wind and water, Sule embarks on the task of interrogating issues of creativity, power, exploitation, and resistance. A Pan-Africanist, he addresses the sociopolitical problems caused by colonialism, venal leadership, political instability and the calamities arising from environmental degradation that have crippled not only his home country of Nigeria but also in other parts of Africa. The poems in *What the Sea Told Me* pivot around ideas of nature as mysterious, as inspiration, as witness, but also as source of Africa's suffering. Employed as the dominant metaphor, the sea is the site of intense emotional and psychological conflict for the poet persona whose attitude towards it is sometimes reverential, amorous, or angry. Nature in the form of the sea is feminized and sexualized and it is at once seen as a muse, lover and repository of Africa's history. Like other African poets who are driven by a sense of duty to society, E.E. Sule strives to highlight the socio-political condition under which people live and to act as a catalyst for change through the representational strategies he adopts in his poems. However, while a streak of radical activism runs through the collection, the treatment of the feminine presence in this text harks back to an age old view that conflates nature with women, a view that prejudices the message he attempts to convey and raises the question of whether the gendering of nature in literature will ever cease. Hence, in the following examination of the collection, an eco-feminist critical approach is adopted not only because it allows for the identification

and analysis of the links between the environment and gender in the poems, but also because it reveals the underlying patriarchal discourse that drives them. But before embarking on an analysis of selected poems in the volume, it is important to appropriately situate *What the Sea Told Me* within the context contemporary African ecopoetry by providing a brief background on the evolution of nature writing from the European Romantic tradition adopted by early West African poets such as Leopold Senghor, John Pepper Clark, and Christopher Okigbo to the ecological concerns raised in the 1980s by poets of the Alter-native school such as Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojiade. Discussions on literary critical theories, ecopoetry, ecocriticism and ecofeminism will follow to help explicate selected poems in Sule's text.

#### Nature Poetry and west African Poets

Man's relationship with nature has long been depicted in literature to elucidate a poetic view of the human condition. For the sake of brevity, here nature writing is traced from the Romantic Movement that originated in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and was spearheaded by William Wordsworth and his contemporaries, Samuel Coleridge, Percy Shelley, William Blake, Lord Byron, and John Keats. In varying degrees, the works of these poets were inspired by a love and appreciation of nature that was seen as a divine creative force. As a literary movement, Romanticism privileged the emotion, individual freedoms, and was essentially a reaction against neoclassical conventions that emphasized the intellect and reason. According to Berlin (2), it was "the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West" mainly because it challenged the scientific ideas of the Age of Enlightenment that ushered in the industrial revolution by promoting the power of individual imagination and of subjective experience.

For the Romantic poets, the imagination was raised to the level of the sacred which led Keats to claim that "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination - What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth" (cited in Abrahms, 302). Blake



also wrote "To see a world in a grain of sand/and heaven in a wild flower" (Auguries of Innocence) because he believed that beauty and balance could only be found in nature. These views illustrate the romantic notion of the sublime whereby the power of descriptive language is employed to arouse deep emotions so as to make man more aware of his surroundings, and thence, to provoke thought. But while nature was seen as the source of creative inspiration, the poets differed in their individual attitudes towards it. For example, Wordsworth was philosophical in his approach to nature and elucidated his viewpoint thus:

One impulse from the vernal wood  
Can teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and good,  
Than all sages can. (The Tables Turn)

While for Wordsworth, nature is a teacher, Coleridge on the other hand, believed that the pleasure that is derived from it emanates not from itself, but rather, from the disposition of the people who ponder upon it. For him art was "the mediatrix between and reconciler of nature and man" (On Poesy or Art). Furthermore, the concept of romanticism varied from period to period. In an essay titled "Wordsworth in the Tropics", Huxley (cited in Abrahms, 2003) criticized Wordsworth's conception of nature. He claimed that Wordsworth's advocacy that we love and revere all forms of nature as great teachers of knowledge and morality could not be applied outside the English Lake District where Wordsworth lived as the same philosophy is not feasible in the tropical climes where swamps and impenetrable forests harbour dangerous animals and strange fevers. Nonetheless, wherever it is found, literary allusions to the environment appear to emerge out of a sense of connectedness to the natural world.

The filtering of emotion to create meaning from the environment that was the dominant preoccupation of Romantic poetry can also be found in the works of African poets of different generations who have successfully disproved Huxley's views of nature in the tropics. Perhaps somewhat influenced by the western education they had received, early West African poets, Leopold Senghor, Birago Diop from Senegal and Wole Soyinka, John



Pepper Clark, and Christopher Okigbo from Nigeria also subscribed to the idea of nature as both awe inspiring and deserving respect. In poems that spanned the colonial and post independence periods of their countries, these poets indulged in philosophical contemplations of nature's creative and sometimes destructive powers and in the process questioned not only man's relationship with the environment but also the cultural and political state of their societies. For instance, Leopold Senghor, a leading figure in Negritude, the black consciousness movement of the 1940s, presents a positive view of the black race and the African landscape in his poetry. European prejudices he experienced during his sojourn in the west resulted in a longing for his homeland that is expressed in his poetry collection *Chants d'ombre* (1945). In his famous poem, "Black Woman", Africa is celebrated as "the promised land" and in terms of a mother, "grown up in her shadow" and of her gentle hands "laid over eyes", and also as a lover "shuddering beneath the East Wind's/eager caresses". For Birago Diop, the African natural world embodies the very essence of his people. In his poem "Vanity", he dwells on the interdependence between man and nature that is the abode of the ancestors who are the spiritual force behind the struggle against powerful colonial powers.

This animistic view of nature found in Diop's poem is shared by other West African poets such as Soyinka and Okigbo. For example, Okigbo's desire to embrace his African traditions is evident in *Heavensgate* (1962) that is dedicated to his family deity, a river goddess called Idoto. One of the poems titled "The Passage" speaks of a home coming:

BEFORE you, mother Idoto,  
naked I stand,  
before your watery presence,  
a prodigal,

leaning on an oilbean;  
lost in your legend...  
Under your power wait I am on barefoot,  
Watchman for the watchword at HEAVENSGATE;

out of the depths my cry  
give ear and hearken.

Here, nature is celebrated in a ritual cleansing that involves total self-surrender to the water spirit that nurtures all creation. The wanderer stands at the gates of a home landscape alluded to in images of its flora and fauna appealing for entry and seeking reconciliation with his roots. Such a poem contradicts Huxley's negative perception that there is nothing to celebrate in an African environment. Although there are biblical references in the use of the words "prodigal," "watchword," and "hearken," the dominant imagery derives from what is African as in the "oilbean tree" that is the traditional Igbo equivalent of the tree of life. Like Okigbo, an African sensibility also permeates the poetic vision of John Pepper Clark when he draws on his experiences of nature in the delta region of Nigeria in "Night Rain", a poem that recalls the impact of a stormy night on a poor household by effectively highlighting not only the poverty of the people but also the terror of a powerful natural phenomenon.

However, first generation African poets have been criticized for the manner in which nature is eulogized their works mainly because their rendering of it is seen as sentimental and excessively preoccupied with private grief rather than concerned with societal problems. Attempts to address this perceived shortcoming came with the emergence of second generation post-colonial poets such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojiade, Harry Garuba and Remi Raji. These poets appear to find their true creative selves when they root their imagination in the African environment but the eco-critical vision that informs their poetry goes beyond a mere celebration of the land. Instead, as committed African literary artists, they adopt an uncompromising stand against the capitalist exploitation of natural resources and highlight the consequent effects on the lives of the masses. Belonging to what has become known as the "Alternative" school, they choose to distance themselves from both the thematic concerns and the poetic style of the previous generation. Writing from a materialist perspective that interrogates the socio-economic



conditions in their societies, they turn their attention to the “prioritization of green discourses, focused on better leadership and socio-economic relations, and on environmental sustainability” (Nwagbara, 3). United in seeking to uphold the rights of the common man as well as the imperative of conserving the environment upon which he depends, they created a body of poetry that is concerned with the need to protect natural resources and speak up for the rights of large sections of society that are disadvantaged.

Tanure Ojaide provides numerous examples of contemporary Nigerian ecopoetry that is intended to raise awareness of the link between man and his environment. In his poetry collections, *Quartet* (2017), *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* (1999), and *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998), attention is focused on the endangered environment of the oil-rich region of the Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. Dedicated to Ken Saro-Wiwa and other activists who lost their lives in the struggle to protect their homeland against the activities of international oil companies, *Delta Blues and Home Songs* highlights Ojaide’s eco-vision as he poignantly utilizes the destruction of the Niger Delta as a metaphor for death:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,  
Reels from an immeasurable wound.  
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow  
From this hurt to unquestioning world  
That lights up its life in a blind trust.  
The inheritance I sat on for centuries  
Now crushes my body and soul...  
My nativity gives immortal pain  
Masked in barrels of oil. (*Delta Blues*)

The degradation of a landscape that can no longer sustain human life is foremost in the mind of the poet persona who laments the destruction of the delta region. Repeatedly in Ojaide’s poetry, the link between the people and the environment is highlighted with the underlying message that the survival of one is dependent upon the other.

A similar eco-vision resonates in the works of Niyi Osundare, another poet of the Alternative tradition whose creative vision and skill has had immense influence a generation of younger poets. The poetry collections, *Moonsongs* (1984) and *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) are cited by critics as the most "unified in approach and sustained in achievement" among Osundare's works especially with regards to the attention paid to nature (Killam (2003:140). Sharing a similar view about *The Eye of the Earth*, Mensah (2003) says that it is "a sustained meditation on the theme of nature" (287). For Brown (2003), these two volumes "...best exemplify on the one hand, the philosophical and political ideas that underpin his work, and on the other, the techniques and cultural resources that so distinctively shape his poetry" (105). Certainly, Osundare's poetry reverberates with environmental politics as he deploys his creative capabilities to highlight the abuse of environmental resources by the ruling elite and the negative impact this has on the lives of rural people.

In the preface to *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), his stance is explained in a description of a pastoral idyll that is indicative of his deep awareness of the connection between man and his environment:

Farmer-born, peasant bred, I encountered dawn in the enchanted corridors of the forest, suckled on the delicate aroma of healing herbs, and the pearly drops of generous moons. Living in those early days was rugged, but barns brimmed with yams fattened by merciful rains and the tempering fire of upland sun. (Preface xi)

However, this recollection of the past does not arise from a romantic nostalgia for what no longer exists; but rather, it is evoked as a defense against the present day destruction of nature as in "Let Earth's Pain Be Soothed":

The sky carries a boil of anguish  
Let it burst



**Dust**

dust brewing kitchens  
dust in busy bedrooms  
dust in retrenching factories  
dust in power brothels

The sky carries a boil of anguish  
Let it burst

The roofs have been silent too long  
the seeds noiseless in the dormitory of the soil  
The earth has been lying too long, and songless.

Nature's displeasure at the despoliation it has suffered is evoked and the resultant scenes of drought and famine are an indictment of those who plunder the land. Osundare invests the earth with qualities that are almost sacred but his interest is in the aesthetics of reconciling humanity with nature. As Bamikunle (1995) notes, "The unique form of The Eye of the Earth lies in its almost total reliance on nature imagery and the writer's ability to animate every aspect of nature" (123). By employing language that is creative and in tune with environment, what he himself describes as employing the "semantics of terrestriality", (words for the earth), Osundare has rightly achieved a reputation as an eco-poet of note. His insistence on the need for poetry to have meaning and to be employed in the service of his people and the land they inhabit conveys a political message that is hinted in "They Too Are the Earth":

They too are the earth  
The swansongs of beggars sprawled out  
In brimming gutters  
they are the earth under snakeskin shoes and Mercedes tires  
They too are the earth  
The sweat and grime of

millions hewing wood and hurling water  
they are earth  
muddy every pore lie naked moles.

Even as attention is drawn to the destruction of the land, a searchlight is focused on how the degradation of the environment affects human society illustrating what Nwagbara (3) refers to as Osundare's criticism of the "capitalist commodification of nature", a theme that is not only a constant in his works but has inspired other eco-poets as such E.E. Sule.

#### From Eco-poetry to Ecocriticism

In reading Osundare's poems, one is reminded of the assertion by German ecocritic and theorist, Herbert Zapf (1996) that through language and the imagination, literature challenges and transforms cultural narratives of humanity's relationship to nature. This is especially true of the poetic form which employs unique techniques to animate issues to do with nature and at the same time is able to contain multiple and even contradictory levels of meaning. By way of association, metaphor, and other literary devices, the poet is able to achieve in a few words what writers of other disciplines that deal with the environment cannot. However, poetry that deals with the environment has changed from the "ecophenomenological" variety of the past that focused on descriptions aimed at increasing readers' appreciation of nature into what is now referred to as eco-poetry. This is an inevitable product of the increasing awareness of the interdependence between humankind and the environment that has developed over time. In particular, it strives to ignite a sense of responsibility for the altered state of the environment by drawing attention to the ecological implications of human activities as well as to the socio-economic politics behind them. Elaborating on the definition of eco-poetry, Ganders & Kinsella(37) write that it "investigates both thematically and formally the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception'. In the same vein, Griffiths (cited in Lidstrom& Garrard, 35) writes that eco-poetry addresses complex "twenty-first century human-environment relations between



local and global, social and ecological, perception and imagination" and in doing so, the tone of the language used is often urgent aimed at unsettling the reader so that action may ensue.

Discussions of ecopoetry are necessarily tied to ecocriticism which in comparison to other forms of literary theories such as postcolonialism, gender, and race studies is a relatively recent addition to text scholarship. But since the 1990s, ecocriticism has been adopted as a more appropriate critical approach for scrutinizing the various ways in which literature treats the subject of nature and has come to include subdivisions such as "literary ecology," "eco-critical studies," "environmental literary studies," and "eco-feminism". The term was coined by William Ruerkert when he stated that "Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment[that] takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature"(cited in Glotfelty & Fromm, 105). However, Cheryll Glotfelty's simple definition of it as the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" encapsulates more succinctly the focus of ecocriticism on representations of nature and man's place in it (1996). Therefore, dealing as it does with how the environment as well as societal attitudes towards nature are depicted and analyzed in a range of literary texts makes it an appropriate critical theory to apply to the study of ecopoetry. Consequently, ecocriticism has been crucial in bringing about more than just awareness of the environment but also turns attention on the psychological and emotional implications of human interactions with nature. According to Lindstrom, it has led scholars to consider "a more transformative discourse that pays attention to a broad range of cultural processes through which complex negotiations of nature and culture take place" (32).

Initially, the first wave ecocriticism focused on the celebration of nature and took a dehistoricized approach that overlooked the political and theoretical dimensions of man's interactions with it. The second wave of ecocriticism approached literary analysis by examining issues of imperialism, environmental degradation as well as gender and race as

ecological concepts. The third wave now works towards a better understanding of the problems arising from global warming and the consequences for both the natural world and for human life. Following this, current ecocritical discourse can be subsumed under two major categories, the ecological variety and the environmental justice vein. The latter approach prioritizes the condition of humans caught up in the interplay of history and global economic demands and appears to be the preferred focus of contemporary African literary artists. Explaining this trend, Caminero-Santangelo(2014) writes that "African environmental writing tends to prioritize social justice, lived environments, livelihoods, and/or the relationship among environmental practices and representations of nature"(18). Similarly, Iheka (2011) notes that African writers frequently strive to awaken the ecological consciousness of their people by highlighting the damaging effects of the activities of multinational corporations on their natural resources. Consequently, Vital suggests that if the field of ecocriticism is to pose pertinent African questions, 'it will need to be rooted in local (regional, national) concerns for social life and its natural environment' (88). Therefore, knowledge of Africa's historical past (pre-colonial, colonial), the postcolonial period, as well as its socio-economic conditions becomes a prerequisite for the effective analysis of the concept of the environment as found in literary works such as E.E. Sule's *What the Sea Told Me*.

Ecofeminism, conceived of by Francoise D'Eubonne (cited in Gates, 1996), is another important critical tool in the following analysis of Sule's poems as it examines how the feminine/women are represented in discourses on the environment. It is useful here because it combines radical ecological and feminist thinking in order to combat gender inequalities and hierarchies in a way that values the environment while simultaneously articulating parallels between the exploitation of women and the degradation of the environment by men. While feminism has made much progress in highlighting the interconnections between various forms of societal oppression (sexism, racism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism), ecofeminists insist that attempts at addressing the degradation of the



nature needs to start with dismantling male patterns of reasoning, privilege and exclusion.

Consequently, ecofeminism strives to question the current system of male domination by analyzing patriarchal structures of power that are responsible for both the oppression of women as well as the view of nature as a commodity to be exploited. Primarily, it is concerned with highlighting male dominance that is anchored on the devaluation, disregard, and exploitation of both nature and women by unveiling the prejudices underlying the creation and reception of art. For instance, in poetry writing, male poets have always dominated "the site of power" which renders the feminine other invisible and mute. Ecofeminist theory is therefore a valuable tool for tracking environmental representations produced by men in literature and for exposing how language is used to promote and transmit the value of that male domination. For this reason, ecofeminist literary criticism is adopted here in an effort to identify, analyze and interpret environment and gender issues in Sule's *What the Sea Told Me*.

### **What the Sea Told Me**

E.E Sule's *What the Sea Told Me* is a collection of fifty poems arranged into three sections, Part One is titled "engaging the rolling lips of the sea"; Part Two, "feeling the sensuous flesh of the sea"; and Part Three, "outside the Sea earth nurses her menstrual cramps." In it, the natural environment, the seascape and the landscape are woven into the themes of power, exploitation, and resistance found in the collection. Images of the ebbs and the flows of the waves and the movement of the wind are conveyed in vivid language that expresses the beauty and power of natural phenomena and man's connection with all of it. Inspired by the nature, Sule aligns himself with the masses of ordinary people in Nigeria and other parts of Africa as he interrogates the negative impact of inept and venal leadership on the people and the environment. Utilizing considerable poetic skills, he draws visual and sometimes violent images of rage, pain, despair, healing, and redemption. But at the same appears to embrace patriarchal notions of

masculinity and femininity thus amplifying the hierarchies between the male and female genders and the space within which they can operate. The sea has appeared in various guises in literature and has inspired poets in conflicting ways arousing different states of mind whether of tranquility, clarity, exhilaration, or fear. While it is often employed as a symbol of nature, it is sometimes used to depict the vicissitudes of life, a parallelism that comes from a realization of its unpredictable nature. The fluid and alterable character of the sea as demonstrated by its capacity to change in an instant from a state of calm into a deadly raging force has been linked to the nature of women encouraging the feminization of this feature of the environment. As evidenced in numerous literary incarnations in which the sea is invested with feminine attributes, it is often used to construct or reinforce notions of gender which arise out of the patriarchal leanings of most human societies.

French feminist and linguist Luce Irigaray rightly notes that "historically the properties of fluids have been abandoned to the feminine" (116). Drawing on this view, Helmreich similarly avers that in texts written by men, the sea is usually portrayed as a "motherly amnion, fluid matrix, seductive siren, and unruly tide," characteristics that are opposed to masculine ideals of strength, rationality, independence, and "dominion over the biophysical" (29). These opposing principles are elaborated in epic poems such as Homers' "Odyssey" or Coleridge's, "The Rime of Ancient Mariner" in which male sailors stood strong against the tempting lures of the sea. A similar gendering of the sea can also be found in Sule's *What the Sea Told Me*. However, while some critical appraisals of the text (Ibrahim, 2016; Kehinde, 2018) examine the depiction of nature in the poems and note the representation of the sea as a woman, no reference is made of the masculine lens that is directed at sea nor is the subjugation of the feminine presence to the political taken into account in analyses of the poems. Yet, ecopoetry such as Sule's is interesting because it highlights a way of thinking that organizes the world into opposite pairs that are assigned hierarchical values especially with regards to notions of 'masculine-feminine' and 'culture-nature'. In the following, selected poems are



examined to find out how Sule's poetic vision of nature is articulated through the metaphorical use of the sea in order to explicate his views on the place of the feminine in the issues raised in his chosen themes.

### The Representation of the Sea as a Woman

In E.E. Sule's *What the Sea Told Me*, the sea serves as the backdrop against which the poet persona projects questions to which he seeks answers as he strives to address complex and difficult issues about roles, privilege and power. Deployed as a leitmotif, the sea is conceptualized as a woman, feminized and sexualized. Evidence this is first seen in the three subtitles that make references to the female body. The third in particular alludes to an aspect of women's bodies that is usually private and hidden from view. As the central symbol, the sea serves a dual purpose; it is both the poet's muse as well as a character that is addressed by poet persona. In some instances, it is simply water in its natural state but in most of the poems it is conceptualized as the feminine "other" and treated as an object of ambivalent male interest. This conflict is apparent in the portrayal of the sea as the poet's muse, comforter, and lover but it is also represented as a complicit witness to terrible historical events, a character upon which the poet persona vents his frustrations and rage. Through these depictions, the inspirational effects of nature, its seductive and healing properties, as well as the, destructive traits of the sea are explored in poems that engage with notions of artistic creativity, exploitation, violence and resistance.

Like the romantic poets of the past, for Sule, creative inspiration comes from the female muse in the form of the sea. By embracing the sea as a metaphor for his elaborations of the world, he weaves a link between the environment and his task as a poet. In the first poem of the collection, the poet persona announces his arrival by the sea:

"I take a humble step"  
 Into your magical self  
 with nothing  
 but the eloquence of  
 the wind.

I belong to a  
paternity raging in the air  
the awesome whoosh  
rumbling through the flora

Unto the expanse  
of your dimple surface  
I come  
sojourner from  
the land of sand and delta  
sufferer from  
the land of forest and desert...

The sense of being one with nature is expressed in the poet persona's feeling of unity with the wind "it's as if all nature speaks with one voice"(4) and thus, the reader is immediately alerted to the eco-poetic sensibility that is at work here. For Sule, poetic art is imbued with a mystical creative spirit that is also found in the sea, land, forests, and skies, "it's as if all nature speaks with one voice"(4) and so, when this is threatened the poet can find comfort in these natural elements. The soothing quality of the sea is again mentioned in the poem "Sure it is": "Tender and graceful/ your touch/oh cool sand of sea/Warmth of your depth/therapy of your waves/ Wrap me tenderly/Give me relief/". The recuperative powers of the sea in "Truly, Truly" is suggested in the words "I long for embrace/ as I court your heroic length/ and in/ the therapy of waves/welcomes tired feet/" as the welcome of the sea provides much needed relief. The reason why the solace provided by the sea is required is revealed in the lines "Your salty breath, your salty stare/cool my frayed nerves/my broken emotion" (5). But a lot of psychological pain accompanies the poet's need for expression, the "Fury of the pen, vitriol of vision" so he calls upon the sea to "Heal this creative infection, oh sea". Belief in the sea's capacity to repair the emotional wounds experienced as an artist is declared in the lines "unto



your hallowed serenity/ skin of your shore soothing/ this eloquent madness.”

The analogy of sea that equates it to a woman found in the poems is manipulated in such a way as to enable seductive “feminine” qualities to be attributed to it. The poem “Typically” speaks of the sea in terms of a woman who draws the poet persona into an intimate relationship: “You welcome me/with windy waves/seductive laughter”. The personification inherent in ‘seductive laughter’ is indicative of how this natural phenomenon is sexualized through the sensuousness attributed to it. That femininity is further expressed in descriptions of her beauty created by the colours reflected upon it by the setting sun and the moon at night.

Awesome how  
You hug earth and sky  
Draw the sky  
So close to me  
& the evening sun sends me gold  
the night moon  
pours down silver  
on your nightly apparel.

While the wind (the poet) and the sea are involved in a never ending tango that ‘puts time to shame’, the poet’s attitude towards the sea is ambivalent. On the one hand, the persona is drawn to the sea but his fear of the sea’s potential for destruction is referred to in “the stones /turn to sand turn to dust/ in your salty presence”(3). However, the irresistible appeal of the sea is further emphasized in Part Two of the collection subtitled “feeling the sensuous flesh of the Sea” where a more personal tone is adopted that prepares the reader for the traditional male/female dynamics found in the poems in this section. In the poem “Underwater lingo”:

To the Sea  
I invite you, dear M  
to the warmth of salt water

to arouse you with watery aphrodisiac  
 & get the passion of underwater lingo....  
 our flesh shall bask in liquid bliss  
 And the Sea will wrap us  
 in the warm sheets of waves  
 and the current will take us  
 into a farther dimple  
 and the creatures will welcome us  
 into the chamber of the mermaid.

In another poem, the intimate relationship between the poet persona and the sea is described in terms of "love and hot tea/ .../oh Sea, your skin is sensuous" (36) before the direct admission that "I may have immersed myself in your supple sexuality/may have given in /to lyrics from seductive waves" (36). Nonetheless, the relationship is far from being played out as equals because in "Violent and at once tender" we find that it is the poet persona who imbued with the spirit of the wind that sets the pace of this emotional association:

The love advancing  
 a raging Wind  
 violent and at once tender....

I, patient lover  
 Son of the Wind  
 burst into your heart  
 home come to reclaim my beads.

The correlation of the sea with the feminine appears to be produced from a patriarchal perspective that serves to perpetuate the idea of the female as a sexual object to be acted upon by the powerful male, in this instance, the "son of the wind". The primacy of the masculine is further upheld when the poet persona exerts his dominance over his lover when he declares that "I come with the flame of renewal" so that "The Sea and Wind/are locked in eternal conjugation!" Thus the decision regarding how the relationship



with the sea/woman is conducted lies solely with the poet persona who is patently male. That dynamic of male domination and female subjugation is symbolized by an "institutionalized lack of voice and choice" (Ujomu, 97) for the feminine object. While the sea is seen as ineffectual and subject to the whims and caprices of others, the masculine poet persona is proud, assertive, independent, and able to decide the direction of events.

A masculine perspective that dominates in African poetry is underscored in *What the Sea Told Me* where repeatedly, the sea is addressed in terms of a living feminine presence, sometimes mysterious or seductive, but always lacking the agency to initiate action. Regarding literature and the visual arts, Mulvey notes that "Woman stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing on them the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (32). In Sule's poems, this appears to be drift especially when attempting to articulate his concern with the decay in the society caused by plundering of the community's commonwealth. The use of strong jarring sexual images such as 'orgasm of iron' (p14); 'Aida's hips' (p33); 'waist bulging with sex' (34) 'supple sexuality' (p36); 'moans of defilers' (p37); 'misfired penis' and 'wayward penises,' 'savagely penises' (p46) portray the rape of society from a masculine angle. The andocentric language used illustrate the claim by Solnit that "[T]he sublime is specifically a male achievement gained through female objects or through feminine nature" (13). Consequently, Sule's language appears to promote the worldview of a poet persona that is evidently male and active. On the other hand, the sea is portrayed as passive, with no agency to act, or take control of events. Thus this way, Sule's text echo notions of the sublime as understood by European Romantic poets whereby feminine nature is also used as an access to the masculine sublime. This is perhaps why ecofeminists argue that when nature is depicted in this manner, such representations hinder the possibility of the very change that concerned eco-poets would like to see happen, and instead, reinforce the social,

political, and psychological oppression a section of society as well as the irresponsible exploitation of the environment.

In tune with the patriarchal structure of society, there are instances in *What the Sea Told Me* when nature is conceived of as maternal. In the poem "It is certain" the poet persona declares, "I will enter your long innards/with wounded arms of history/ begging to be healed". The ambivalence towards the sea mentioned earlier, is again revealed in the way it is conversely seen as the cause and then as the healer of Africa's wounds when the poet beseeches the sea to conjure a permanent end to the misery that prey upon his people: "Oh Sea/invoke a death/from your eerie bowel/to strike these repeated ghosts/throwing dust in the eyes of my folks" (15). Sometimes embraced as a lover or beloved mother figure, and at other times, rejected as the epitome of all that is wrong with Africa, this contradictory portrayal of the sea turns it into a pawn in the game of power as highlighted in poems that reflect on historical experiences that have shaped Africa.

The decision of the poet persona to come to the sea is at first driven by a perception of the comfort it could provide especially in a world of political instability and insecurity. In "It is amazing," the relief provided by the tranquility of the sea alleviates the pain of political betrayal in the "land of sun and thunder" - two natural elements that represent hardship and destruction. Thus in some of the poems such as "Bowing before you", the focus is not only on personal suffering but also on what is wrong in society, a concern that ignites in the poet persona the need to "...rise to cure my nation of paralysis /with fragrant concoction of blasphemies"(14). Hence, in those poems speak of past and present injustices inflicted on Africa and its people, the poet's voice rings with more intensity. But while the sea is represented as a witness to momentous events, it is accused of being complicit in the worst experiences that have ravaged Africa such as the slave trade:

When your belly was Middle Passage  
uncountable heroes in their vital nights  
their last covenants, their last sighs



sought your strong arms.

Connivance!

You could have snatched their rudders!

You could have stormed their weather! (21)

Solnit's assertion that "politics has invaded the landscape" (47) is evident in *What the Sea Told Me* where an undercurrent of politicized discourse runs through poems that question the socio-economic disparity that exist in society. The origin of Africa's poverty is traced to the greed and exploitative manoeuvres of the West and their African collaborators. The injustices perpetrated on the masses are hidden behind the familiar adage that the "fingers are not equal". But Sule explains how the disparity between different sections of society is traceable to the distortion of history and facts: "Fingers' rapid legs have trodden treasure of histo-lies have crossed ridges of vast dreams nomadic with untamed longings." (51) The pun on history indicates the poet's concern with the history of extortion as suffered by Africans. Hence, in the "Parable of fingers" the persona then asserts with great conviction: "Fingers shall remain equal on the lips of this reform to author wild arithmetic to out-Sea the sea". His desire to change the course of Africa's downward spiral is because "Truth is/ ages are going/ nations are wasting" (8), therefore as he declares "I rise to cure my nation of paralysis" (14).

The intention of the poet persona to uncover the connections between the colonial masters and their African collaborators is made clear when he declares "I hate to know men/hide truths in their scrotums/murder nations in their silences" even as the sea is called upon to reveal its secrets "Tell me oh Sea / the matrimony of past and present" (9). But the sea's indifference to the historical damages inflicted on Africa is questioned: "What do you say/of the eternal decay/of the immortal rust/unwashed by you?" The apparent inaction of the sea against the injustices perpetrated on the continent is denounced in "Still":  
Africa is bleeding from centuries of injuries,

and not all the waters in your belly, oh Sea  
can wash these rags of blood, can quench these

embers of wound; not even your hydro-bravery  
can resist the solar intruders who turn green to brown.  
Yet you wrap Africa by the waist  
your tender touch the affection of fake lover.

From where else will flow the waters  
to wash these bloody acids?

With your workaholic waves, oh Sea  
Couldn't you have risen to  
their pestilential lingo?

The sea is positioned alongside the erring parties and accused of being complicit in grievous acts against Africa even as the persona warns against the continuing threat that is posed by the West's insatiable hunger for Africa's resources because "The road is famished/gulping talents/defecating them/in the marbled streets of the West"(31). Earl in the collection, attention is drawn to the tragic result: "There stands the postcolonial child/heels above the ground/from pre-to post- the chaos is unfinished" (5). But Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, referring to how the feminine perspective is represented once asked in exasperation, "Did we not all suffer the varied wickedness of colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and global imperialists and fascism together" (cited in Ujumo, 2001).

However, in some of the poems such as "We are", the sea is not a character but a destination for the sons of Africa who seek to return to its shores and who "... will come to you, oh Sea/ with shy steps/ a quiet song on our lips". While the desire to bring them home is expressed, the poet warns that the colonizer should not provoke him with "watery moral" or "aquatic idiom" because as he declares, "I will not be the hare beaten by rain twice" (42). On the one hand, the sea is seen as the conduit through which Africa is



drained of its treasures both human and nonhuman and on the other, it is imbued with mystical powers that help to summon back the continent's estranged sons in an act of repentance that recalls Okigbo's return of the prodigal son in "The Passage". The wish for Africans to reconnect and reclaim what belongs to them is stated in the lines "We will harvest in you, oh Sea/Beads, only beads/That will link us to our ancestral goddess". Illustrious sons of Africa on exile are urged to return "Okri and Nduka I invoke home//through you, oh Sea .../Bid Okri and Nduka come home/with a cock, a goat, a pot/to pour libation under the baobab" (23). Thus serving both as a physical and as well as a metaphorical link, the sea ties the fortunes of Africa with foreign lands just as it connects the past with the present.

### Words on Water

More than other literary genres, poetry is able to contain multiple and even contradictory levels of meaning which the above examination of *What the Sea Told Me* attempts to uncover. A text such as this provides important insights into the different ways human-nature interactions are addressed. By employing the unique qualities of poetic language, the relationships between the social and ecological, local and global issues, as well as between cultural values and the imagination are revealed. Thus, through the skillful use of linguistic devices such as figures of speech, diction, and some lexical items borrowed from his creative mentors, Sule competently conveys a message of struggle, pain and resistance. Acknowledging the debt he owes to stalwarts of African literature such as Soyinka, Armah, Ousmane and Okri, he confesses:

I have sought syllables and phrases of penmusic  
gentle on metres like morning breeze on leaves.

I have embellished my talent with tones of master poets  
racing with the Wind in search of illusory name. (50)

However, Osundare exerts the most significant influence on Sule's poetic style as revealed by his own admission in the preliminary pages of *What the Sea Told Me* where he attests to drawing his poetic metaphor of the

"sea" from Osundare's "These words walk on the sea and they never sink". Again in the poem 'I plead', Sule refers to Osundare as a poet father-figure who guides his vocation: "Bear me down your abode to pluck Niyi's pastoral rhyme .../I hide behind Niyi rhymes" (7). This allusion to Osundare's mentoring role is reemphasized towards the end of the same poem: "The sun my companion will linger ashore Senegal's flutes will never grow weary in this ritual of Niyi's pastoral rhymes (7). The "sun" connotes the guiding light Osundare's craftsmanship has been for poets of Sule's generation in their efforts to create their own poetic voice and style. Sule's admiration for Osundare's poetic art is further demonstrated in instances when he adopts Osundare's imagery, satiric mode, word play, and lexical collocations. The line "I take a humble step/ Into your magical self with nothing but eloquence of the Wind" (2) can be traced to Osundare in *Waiting Laughters* (1991) where he writes: "Waiting like the silver fire of the adze, tongue honed on the eloquence of the wind.... "(77). For Sule, the visual appeal of the metaphoric of the phrase 'eloquence of the wind' relates appropriately with the thematic thrust of seeking a poetic voice that permeates to a large audience. In Osundare's text, the repeated use of evocative word "eloquence" as in the lines "the rapid eloquence of the running vowel" (p5); 'With the eloquence of the sword' (p53) and 'the eloquent valle which loomed' (p61), inspired Sule's 'eloquent madness' (p5); 'eloquent mediocrity' (p2); 'the eloquent idiom of the sea' (p29). Also where Osundare uses the lexical term 'liquid' as in 'liquid snore' (p9); 'liquid depth' (p80); 'liquid lesson' (p88) and 'liquid breath' (p96) to conjure images of the free movement of his thoughts, Sule parallels the same in 'liquid lore' and 'liquid idiom' (p13); 'liquid laughter' (p15); 'liquid accent' (p9); 'liquid bliss' (p39) and 'liquid tales'. On some occasions, the imagery employed in Sule's poems is satirical and at times bitter but they combine to draw attention to the poet's concerns as he aligns himself with the voiceless and the dispossessed in society because as he says: "I hate to know men/hide the truth in their scrotums/murder nations in their silences"(9).



However, Sule's imagination and deployment of language is a more combative engagement with the problems in his society than found in Osundare's poems because in an effort to speak of uncomfortable issues there must be no prevarication about the problems bedeviling Africa: "Don't gurgle on/as if Africa is cured of its protracted diarrhoea!...Don't astonish with your beam/ as if Africa has regained its broken legs!" (p7) This attitude is in consonance with ecopoetry's attempt to bring about change in societal perceptions and actions. Concerned with the decay in society caused by the plundering of the natural commonwealth of the masses, in *What the Sea Told Me*, the poet persona takes a stand for himself and for his community as demonstrated in the personal tone adopted in the use of the first person "I" in the poems such as "I take a take a humble step", "I plead", "I ask", "I dare", "I confess" and "I implore". At first, these titles strike a note of entreaty but the poems are in fact fearlessly assertive in the use of forceful imagery found in them. The first glimmer of hope for the future come in the lines "My conversation with you/oh Sea / is eternal./ Some night it will be sleep well Africa./ Someday it will be daybreak Africa(13).

### Conclusion

Throughout *What the Sea Told Me*, Sule succeeds in keeping the sea foremost in the mind of the reader. Serving as more than just a backdrop for events, the identity of poet persona is constructed through the depiction of this natural feature as a living character with whom he dialogues. In using the sea to explore poetic creativity as well as to articulate resistance against the reckless exploitation of Africa's natural resources, hidden truths are revealed about both the art of ecopoetry and of human society. Involved in the concerns about the exploitation of the environment found in *What the Sea Told Me* are complex issues that have to do with social justice, politics and gender. However, while the inequalities between different strata of society are interrogated, the shared vulnerabilities of men and women are not recognized in the construction of the sea metaphor. Instead, the exploitation of both nature and women is

sustained because the poems are produced from a patriarchal perspective that subjugates and marginalizes the feminine other. In it, nature is portrayed as the preserve of men who wrestle for control over it, and in the process, women are sidelined suggesting that old claims are still embraced. Yet poetic depictions of human-environment relations are important because the socio-political commitment and representational strategies adopted have the potential to alter perceptions and possibly to influence the ways issues relating to the two genders are viewed. For this reason, and for its attempt to engage with difficult questions involving the environment and social justice, *What the Sea Told Me* has earned its place in contemporary ecopoetry.

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