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Alterity in the Poetry of Sophia Obi and Mabel Evwierhoma: A Postcolonial Critique

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Abstract
A writer's socioeconomic background shapes the content of the literary production. Any writing that depicts how the writer's social milieu influences the ideological direction and preoccupation is bound to reveal details of their lives. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the alterity in poetry of Sophia Obi and Mabel Evwierhoma's artistic imagination. The essay samples the poems of Obi in the collection, *Tears in the Basket* and Evwierhoma's *Solitude and Other Chants* (henceforth abbreviated as TAB and SOC respectively). The methodology adopted is qualitative research while postcolonial alterity theory is applied in reading the poems in order to unveil the pain and precarity of the envisaged other. The findings of the study reveal that both Obi and Evwierhoma are the keen observers of the environment and are influenced by it. It is also discovered that Obi squarely focuses attention on the Niger Delta predicament while Evwierhoma identifies with the predicament of the girl child. The paper concludes that Obi depicts alterity through the portrayal of environmental dispoliation and impoverishment of the Niger Delta while Evwierhoma articulates alterity through the portrayal of the girl child as victims of sexual harassment, child marriage, and defilement as strategies to arouse public attention as well as actualize societal redirection.
Keywords: Alterity, environment, child marriage, sexual harassment

Introduction
The title of this paper evokes two responses: first, to the poetry and then to the poets. It further elicits an introspective connection between the two. The poetry of alterity as envisioned in this paper exposes the reader to see the marginalized order as victims of the hegemonic self who controls the narrative. In this kind of poetry, efforts are geared towards giving a voice to the oppressed. In most cases, the poet functions as the voice of that repressed other. For this reason and several others, the poetry of alterity does not ignore social infractions which indirectly implicate the abusive and oppressive

self, thus articulating social activism where in the poet employs the poems to seek social change. The polarity between the forces of good and evil understandably is central to the alterity discourse. The poems which portray the differences between the self and the other are found to champion the cause of the embittered and oppressed who often have the mission to achieve change. Thus, the poetry of alterity aligns towards projecting the voice of the oppressed group, and demonstrates the ways in which they have been unfair to the marginalized other.

The notion of alterity has been a recurring motif in postcolonial literature, revealing the intricate web of relationships and power struggles and cultural tensions that emanate from colonial domination and its aftermath. Nigerian poetry, in particular offers a fresh perspective through which to explore these issues, with poets like Sophia Obi and Mabel Evwierhoma delving into the complexities of otherness in their poetry.

Nigeria's legacy of colonialism and its ongoing challenges with identity, societal values and power dynamics have created an intricate and elaborate literary culture. Obi and Evwierhoma, as notable Nigerian poets, have explored this landscape, creating poems that reflect the nuanced postcolonial discourse. Their poetry offers a detailed investigation of alterity demonstrating ways in which colonialism and its legacy have influenced Nigerian cultural expression.

The alterity of Sophia Obi and Mabel Evwierhoma's poetic imagination represents the Niger Delta poets who from their background have witnessed what it is to be a minority group in an oppressive society as well as being female poets who have also been witnesses to several abuses suffered by the girl child in a country like Nigeria. Therefore, it is impossible that alterity will not influence the dominant issues in their poems. The poems of Obi and Evwierhoma dwell on the issues affecting the Niger Delta people and the girl child respectively. Gabriel Okara explains that Obi's poems present the Niger Delta "struggle for the control of their resources" (viii-ix), In Okara's view, the theme of resource control, the agitation for it, and the anticipated victory all provide materials for Obi's poetic contemplation. Although Okara is correct in his assessment of Obi's poetry, his views are not extended to postcolonial alterity, which is the crux of this paper. Adedoyin et al. affirm the restorative power of poetry to imbue the reader with the hope of change (63). It is this hope that Obi and other Niger Delta poets canvass for the people of that region. The poems also expose the potential danger of abandoning the place and its people to their fate. Kenneth Chukwu and Crescent Onyema (2018) examine Obi's presentation of Niger Delta predicament through images of women "couched in the exploitation of nature by the human where nature (the Niger Delta ecology) is imagined as a woman" (128). These critics compare the way men exploit women to the way oil companies and government officials exploit the rich oil resources in Niger Delta. Hence, the image of women serves to depict the injustice expressed through the body of women as a dialectical medium of literary communication. Eyoh Etim (2013) reveals that Obi's poetry "document the anguish experienced by the people of the Niger Delta because of the neglect of the region by the powers that be" (xxxviii). Etim through the essay highlights the agonies which the Niger Delta people suffer.

Femi Osofisan's reading of Evwierhoma's poems exposes the diversity and depth of her themes. He highlights "the exploitation of women, the abuse of minors and child rape, human trafficking, environmental degradation and climate change" (Blurb) as some of the issues addressed in the poems. Osofisan's views do not show how the identified themes are explored in the poems. This leaves a critical gap in the reading of her poems. Commenting on Evwierhoma's poetic enterprise, Tanure Ojaide writes that "she is a matured poet who has fine tuned her themes and techniques with a masterly force" (Blurb). Ojaide's view is to be noted in how she has been able to improve her themes and

techniques in such a way as to engage contemporary issues. Bartolomew Chizoba Akpah (2018) seems to hold the view that satire is a strong weapon employed in the poems to denounce societal infractions that assail women, children and the poor (136). Although satire is employed in her poems, the poetic motivation and intent are not examined in the essay. This has necessitated the current essay which dwells essentially on a postcolonial critique of alterity. These various comments and several others on Obi and Evwierhoma's poems help to affirm the alterity of their poetic imagination.

Notwithstanding the importance of Obi and Evwierhoma's poetry, there remains a lack of critical attention to their focus on alterity. Existing scholarship has tended to dwell on more prominent Nigerian poets, such as Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark-Bekederemo, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide and Odia Ofeimun, leaving the contributions of Obi and Evwierhoma relatively unexamined. This oversight has resulted in a limited understanding of the ways in which Nigerian poetry engages with alterity and its implications for postcolonial identity and culture.

This paper seeks to address the following research questions: How do Obi and Evwierhoma represent alterity in their poetry? In what ways do their representations of alterity reflect the complexities of postcolonial Nigeria identity and culture? How do Obi and Evwierhoma's explorations of alterity in their poetry reflect the complexities of postcolonial literature and its engagement with issues of otherness.

This paper is limited to an analysis of the poetry of Obi and Evwierhoma, and does not attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of Nigerian poetry or postcolonial literature more broadly. Additionally, the study relies on a postcolonial critical framework, which may not exhaustively capture the complexities of Obi and Evwierhoma's work.

Postcolonial Alterity as Theoretical Framework

This paper applies the postcolonial theory. Although postcolonialism has many strands such as cosmopolitanism, subalternism, feminism, environmentalism, globalization, alterity and several others, however, the essay adopts postcolonial alterity as the theoretical background. Postcolonialism deals with the configuration of colonial heritage in postcolonial writings, and how it manifests in works by non-colonial writers. The frontrunners of this theory are Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.

The theory of alterity presupposes the duality of existence which shows the relationship between the self and the other. According to Ashcroft et al, "Alterity is derived from the Latin *alteritas*, meaning 'the state of being other or different, diversity, otherness" (9). The original meaning draws attention to the existence of that other person or group which appears to possess different perspectives, ideas or experiences. Ashcroft et al explain further that alterity in English means "alternate, alternative, alternation and alter ego." They argue that the term is used interchangeably with otherness. In the opinion of Harm-Peer Zimmermann, "the concept of alterity involves debating ways of acknowledging otherness responsibly on the one hand and being able to articulate and represent oneself on the other" (84). Thus, alterity concerns the effective depiction of how the self and the other are related. Better still, it involves how the two are expressed through literary creations. The portrayal of one ultimately expresses the way the other is considered or even perceived.

Conversely, Anthony E. Muhammad describes alterity as "simply the consciousness of self as unique from the other. Muhammad explains quoting Roberts that the "other' has been seen as "all persons outside of one's self" (309). This view draws attention to the subject of discrimination, even that of injustice when alterity is being

discussed. For certain, alterity projects the self to the exclusion of the other. Thus, the self, when considered, becomes the approved or the special one. The other then represents the disfavoured one. Therefore, if the other represents all persons outside of one's self, then alterity highlights the plight of the other.

Considering alterity from African perspective, Prince Oghenetega Ohwavworhua writes that: "alterity has engendered disillusionment experienced by Africans due to failed leadership in Africa. These have, consequently, created a huge gap between the privileged "self" and the unprivileged "other" (64). In the above scholar's view, the self in colonial era refers to the colonial masters while the colonized people represent the other. In postcolonial setting, the new self refers to the political leaders while the other connotes the downtrodden. What emerged from Ohwavworhua's view is that the gap between the political leaders and the poor has remained unbridged as it has even become ever more widened. Situating the concept of alterity in Nigeria, Oyeniyi Okunoye explains,

> The people of the Niger Delta consciously define themselves as the "other" within Nigeria. This is evident in the way they draw attention to their marginal location in the Nigerian project and the growth in various parts of the region of associations and movements committed to articulating and realising their basic rights. (417)

The concept of alterity is related to the way one perceives one's association with other people. The Niger Delta people see themselves as those exploited because of the rich deposit of crude oil. They have continued to consider the government as the self while they regard themselves as the exploited other. Even beyond Niger Delta, in family relationships, alterity finds expression in the difference in the way women and men are treated. In most cases, women see themselves as the abused other while men are regarded as the hegemonic self. The same goes for how the rich and the poor relate with each other. The poor see themselves as the other while the rich are perceived and presented as the self.

In this paper, the theory of alterity is employed to read the poems of Evwierhioma and Obi as it helps to expose the binarity in their qualities and their relationships. Alterity is therefore a useful theory as it exposes the poems to deeper perspectives.

This paper therefore hopes to establish that Obi mainstreams alterity through the portrayal of environmental despoliation and impoverishment of the Niger Delta in *Tears in a Basket* while Evwierhoma articulates alterity through the portrayal of the girl child as victims of sexual harassment, child marriage and defilement in *Solitude and other Chants* as strategies to call attention to the anomalies and actualize societal redemption.

Postcolonial Alterity in Obi's Poetry

The crux of Obi's poems is environmental despoliation. One such poem is entitled "Oloibiri" (46-47). The poet envisions Oloibiri town, noted for its rich oil wells in Nigeria, through personification as a human being who has been set free from massive exploitation:

> At last I am free,
> Free from bondage
> Yet,
> Desolate like a wealthy aged whore wrapped in gloomy attire,
> I lay on the altar of a faded glory,
> Oily tears rolling through my veins
> To nourish households in the desert. (46)

The above excerpt is erected on the superstructure of irony. The said freedom is ironical because Oloibiri town, which had always experienced oil exploration, has suddenly become a desolate place since oil exploration has stopped. This freedom comes with the stoppage of oil exploration, thus leading to the end of environmental pollution. Through repetition of the word, "free," the poet emphasises the end of all environmental hazards to which Oloibiri town used to play host. Equally tragic is the aftermath of the cessation of the oil activities. Firstly, relying on simile, the poet compares the way the town has been desolated or even abandoned to the way a wealthy aged whore is forsaken. The power of this simile is noticed in the portrayal of the town as a rich oil field but because of the many years of exploitation, it has become uninhabitable. To further denounce environmental pollution, the poet describes the town using the image of a whore who is wrapped in gloomy attire to convey the sense of an uninspiring ecoworld denied its splendour and grace. Secondly, the "glory" of the town is said to be "faded." This refers to the gradual halt to social and economic activities which were associated with the oil exploration. Thirdly, as the people of Niger Delta, represented by Oloibiri, groan and experience "oily tears," that is, tears caused by oil activities, those in the North, metonymically represented by "the desert," get nourished and benefit from the oil politics. The message being passed is that as the Niger Delta people bear the brunt of the exploitation without compensation through infrastructural and economic rewards, those in the North are prospering from it. Here the poet is indirectly calling attention to this environmental injustice.

The poet further recounts the woes the people of Niger Delta experience in the following lines:

Along my coast,
The smoke
And stench
Of my crude flow desecrates
My marine reserves. (46)

Those who reside in oil communities in the Niger Delta are familiar with the iconic smoke associated with gas flares. That smoke is a symbol of environmental pollution. This is further concretized through olfactory imagery as the speaker remembers the stench of oil. These two iconic images: the "smoke" and the "stench" of crude oil are said to "desecrate" the "marine reserves." The poet wants the reader to see environmental pollution as a sign of unacceptable desecration of the Niger Delta ecosystem because the entire economic and social life of the people are ruined. Thus, the sudden end of oil exploration is what the speaker calls the "coasted freedom of torment" which converts their "anguish" to "joy."

Having borne the burden of environmental degradation, the poet expresses total disappointment when the oil wealth is stolen by those in power:

I frown
Yes, I frown at the daily discovery
Of unrequited oil returns
The harvest belongs to the tyrant
So I frown. (46)

The speaker's dispassionate asseveration is expressed through carefully chosen alliterative words and sustained by repetitive and metaphoric lines. For example, the word, "frown" is repeated thrice to convey the speaker's displeasure over the state of environmental injustice to which the Niger Delta people are subjected. Also, the words, "daily discovery" and "unrequited … returns" are alliterative structures that further paint the sense of deliberate denial which the people suffer. On daily basis, the government

and the oil companies discover new oil wells but the proceeds from oil do not reach the people. Thus, they are unrequited. Consequently, the tyrant, represented by the government keeps the "harvest" to itself. This situation saddens the speaker. In a denunciatory tone, the speaker reveals the pain of exploitation:

I hear the echo of years gone by
In my vicinity, the quake of discovery.
A zebra strings of pipelines running
Through my belly,
Causing me to ache from relentless exploitation. (46)

Oil exploration and eventual discovery does not give the speaker reasons for celebration, as oil discovery has caused the people to "quake," a metaphor for social and economic displacement. To justify the claim, the poet resorts to metaphoric construction of the pain. The oil rigs and pipelines are said to form "a zebra strings" which run through the "belly" of the earth, "causing" the people "ache from relentless exploitation" (46).

The speaker further denounces the despoliation of Niger Delta environment through evocative narration:

Diminished by the effluence of my flow,
My generosity hangs me on the scale of extinction
And because my crude flow
Is poisonous to my children
Restive, they fight to survive the torment. (47)

The opening line of the above excerpt draws attention to the negative impact of industrial pollution, occasioned by the emission of "effluence," which "diminished" the environment. Thus, the oil exploration, which ought to be a blessing to the land of Oloibiri, the generous host, appears to regret that the "generosity" endangers the people. The "crude flow" has become "poisonous" to the children of Niger Delta. To redress and remedy the situation, the youths have become "Restive," as they have picked up arms to "fight to survive the torment." The poet provides the rationale for youth restiveness, as it is presented above as a product of unjust treatment of the people. The speaker ends the poem on the note of positive anticipation of change:

But I am awakened
By the oily tears of Ijaw Nation

And I hear the laughter,
I hear the celebrations,
The joyful uproar that comes
With controlling the blessings
Of my God-given inheritance. (47)

The activist's call for change is achieved through the portrayal of painful injustice which the oil communities suffer in the Niger Delta. The poet calls for resource control as the antidote to the despoliation of Niger Delta environment. The use of auditory imagery and repetition of the phrase: "I hear the laughter" and "the celebrations" express the expected change in which the people of Niger Delta will be allowed to control "the blessings" of their "God-given inheritance" (the oil wealth). This privileged control will be greeted with "joyful uproar," "laughter" and "celebrations" which metaphorically construct victory for the people.

The anger of the poet is also kindled against those who impoverish the Niger Delta people. Through the tone of denunciation, the poet reveals that she is an environmental activist. An excellent example is found in Obi's poem, entitled "swamps of our time" (51):

Niger Delta, like my mother's love,
Forgives those who mock her nudity;
Like my mother's smiles,
She welcomes, from molar to molar,
Traitors who danced to the rhythm of
Her broken heartbeats.
With the milk from her breast
She moulds dusty earth into mansions,
While her children peep from tattered huts. (51)

The technique of personification is employed to evoke the image of a loving and caring woman. Niger Delta is described as a human being, through two similes. The first compares the region to the love of his mother, forgiving "those who mock her nudity." The word, "nudity," takes a symbolic significance when it is studied against the environmental context from where it is taken. By nudity, therefore, the speaker presupposes the emptiness, precarity and even frailty of the ruined environment. The region has been exploited and despoiled to the extent that its adverse condition has turned it to a laughing stock. Similarly, the second simile is used to compare the Niger Delta to the speaker's mother's smiles, which welcome "traitors." These said traitors also are people who derive joy from the pain of the Niger Delta people. These perceived traitors are people from Niger Delta who collaborate with outsiders in government and foreigners in oil companies to steal the oil wealth without regard to the development of the region as long as their own pockets are lined with foreign currency. This explains why the poet employs the images of dance and music to convey the indifference and gross insensitivity on the part of these traitors who dance to the rhythm of her broken heartbeats.

The subsequent stanza is enriched with symbolic signs with deep and insightful meanings. For example, words like "breast," "mansions," "milk," and "tattered huts" are symbols with diverse meanings. As for "the milk," it stands for the crude oil and its numerous resources, and "her breast" refers to the oil wells. Based on these collocative associations, Niger Delta, evoked as a woman, "she," is said to mould "dusty earth into mansions." The word, "mansions," connotes among other things, infrastructural development and modern facilities that represent urbanity. Sadly enough, the children of Niger Delta are contented to "peep from tattered huts," which symbolize the impoverishment of the Niger Delta people. This is an irony because one would expect the Niger Delta people and their communities to be turned into urban cities followed by massive infrastructural development. The irony is further fuelled by their social condition of being mere on-lookers in the sphere of things. Furthermore, the speaker reveals that oil pollution impoverishes the people: "She marches with shameless pride on polluted soil/ That once fed naked children who giggled/ In huts built with thatches of communal peace" (51). Still employing the technique of personification, the speaker paints a picture of Niger Delta as a woman who "marches" on "polluted soil" that once "fed" the naked children (Niger Delta children) who dwell in "thatches." Many images of impoverishment abound in this excerpt. Firstly, the Niger Delta soil used to feed her children. That the soil is now polluted shows its inability to sustain the people. Hence, Niger Delta agricultural potentiality is utterly destroyed. Secondly, the Niger Delta children still live in thatches even when Nigeria as a country has embraced modern civilization and urban life. Thus the huts register in the mind the sense of poverty and economic pain. Thirdly, the speaker indirectly hints that the impoverishment of the Niger Delta people, which was known for "communal peace," has become home to youth restiveness, violent agitation and unimaginable chaos.

The speaker laments through patterns of rhetorical questions drawing a parallel between environmental pollution and the impoverishment of the Niger Delta:

O'delta of our beginnings how has the past left you?
How is the present treating you?
What is the future of your ecosystems?
Can you turn back the swamps of time?
Can you chasten the sands of life?
Can you command the rivers to be still? (51)

Six questions are raised rhetorically to convey the speaker's conviction. In the first, the speaker believes that the past has left the Niger Delta behind. Her glorious past of wealth has left them in a state of penury and pain. The present is said to be treating the people unkindly, as everything has turned upside-down. The speaker does not see any better future for the people. Surely, the three remaining questions convey the sense of impossibility. The speaker is of the opinion that the people of Niger Delta cannot turn back the swamps, nor can they chasten the sands of life impoverished and imperiled by pollution neither can they command the rivers to be still which now have disappeared. Thus the ecosystems are ruined. This leaves the Niger Delta without a future for their ecosystems. The poet concludes the poem with an indigent imagery: "Niger Delta, like my mother's soul/ Grieves for her children who give bountifully/ yet feed on remnants" (51). The stanza reveals a deprecatory tone which is evident in the word, "Grieves," to show the anger and disappointment of Niger Delta who is said to "give bountifully" yet her children "feed on remnants." This smacks of irony. By giving bountifully, Niger Delta and the children are supposed to feed bountifully from their rich oil wealth. That they feed on remnants goes to imprint the impoverishment of the people.

The poet employs denunciation of despoliation and impoverishment to convey the poet's fight against environmental degradation and calls for environmental activism. Through diverse figurative techniques, the poet amplifies the pain of environmental hazard in Niger Delta and instigates the people to rise against the unjust suffering of the people. Hence, the poet uses irony and rhetorical questions to incite the people of Niger Delta in particular and the reader in general.

Postcolonial Alterity in Evwierhoma's Poetry

Evwierhoma's poems depict the predicament of the girl child in Nigeria and articulate three types: sexual harassment, child marriage and defilement. The poet depicts the vulnerability of female students to sexual harassment from their male lecturers. This is the focus of the poem, "Stray" by Evwierhoma. It recounts the various methods employed by randy lecturers to solicit for sex from innocent young ladies. The speaker, employing imperative verbs, protests against sexual predation:

Keep your eyes off the mound on her chest
Or the bump at her back
And face what you set out for – subsistence

Keep your hands off her face, with shades or not
Let them not stray to the band of her skirt-belted or not. (30)

The speaker gives the men a restraining order, by cautioning male lecturers to keep their eyes off "the mound on her chest," a euphemism for breasts as well as "the bump at her back," another euphemism for the voluptuous buttocks of a lady. They are also enjoined to keep their hands off her skirt. Through subtle hints, the speaker condemns sexual harassment. They are advised to strictly focus their attention on their job which guarantees their "subsistence":

Sir, before you is a waif, seeking the path to life
By the institutional meal ticket-for life.

Her vulnerable self needs succor and cover from you
Not for it to be a target as she stands before you,
Leader of thought and captain of ideas
Full of substance and clout
And global renown. (30)

The feminist activist consciousness centres on the speaker's decision to educate the male folk about the fragility of their female target. The lady in the stanzas above is one represented as a vulnerable entity who needs direction in life. The university offers the said lady an opportunity to get ahead in life. Therefore, the speaker counsels lecturers (especially men) to use their good offices to help advance her future. They are reminded that she needs their help and protection from those who will derail her future. They are dissuaded from seeing her as "a target" of sexual predation. Lastly, the speaker reminds lecturers that they are leaders of "thought," "captain of ideas," men of "substance and clout" who are of "global renown." By drawing their attention to these qualities of theirs, they are expected to be more careful and to commit themselves to noble ideals and not to imperil their lives and careers because of sexual perversity. Having spoken those words, the speaker commands the lecturers thus:

Let no calloused fingers lift her skirt
Or wonder if those camisole straps are made of real spaghetti
Or if her locks are real or not
Keep the arthritic metatarsals in your shoes
At your side of the table. (30)

The stanza above functions through the use of synecdoche. Synecdoche operates through the use of a part to represent the whole as the above stanza reveals. For example, the speaker forbids the men from touching the lady. To convey this idea, the image of touching is symbolized by the "calloused fingers" while the lady is represented by the metonymic "skirt," "camisole straps" and "her locks." These help to express the antics of the men who under the guise of checking if the camisole straps are real or not, find themselves sexually harassing the ladies. As the speaker indirectly indicates, the said lecturers are on a mission to unstrapping the camisole straps in order to undress the ladies.

The speaker shows in the next stanza that a world of difference exists between the two: "Her hunger is different from yours/ Hers one of the mind/ Yours after her flesh" (30). While the ladies are desirous of mental empowerment and better future through learning, the lecturers are full of sexual desires to ravage their female students. The metaphor of hunger is meant to emphasize the burning desire of the lecherous lecturers. Thus the flesh of their female students is their hunger but that of the ladies is education. These lecturers take undue advantage of the hunger of these young ladies to feed their own hunger for sex. Consequently, they do everything to make sex a bargaining tool for lazy female students to actualize their dream.

Still fighting for the young female students, the speaker cautions against any use of force against female students:

Do not make a sacrifice of an unwilling heifer
In the cold room,
Or steal one from the shed of slaughter slabs
Where the unwilling votive
Struggles not to surrender

The promise kept to her betrothed
At the communal well. (30)

The poet cautions the male lecturers against sexually harassing unwilling female students. This idea is expressed through animal imagery. The said "unwilling heifer" refers to young ladies. The "sacrifice" represents sexual intercourse. They are also warned against stealing a heifer from "the shed of slaughter slabs." The image of an abattoir envisions the university campus as a slaughter house where ladies are sexually molested. In this slaughter house, many of the young ladies are unwilling to compromise on their vows. Thus they struggle not to surrender to their male lecturers who too have vowed to sexually destroy them. Through the tone of anger, the speaker condemns sexual harassment in all its entirety and frowns at those who revel in it. The poet bares her feminist fang at this shameful phenomenon which is destroying the university.

Evwierhoma employs the poem, "Freedom, the girl" to denounce child marriage which is the main thrust of the above poem. Through the voice of the speaker, we hear the feminist activist voice. The poem opens with vivid symbolic depiction of unsafe social environment for the girl child:

Freedom pursues and flees at the same time
To perilous skies of hawks circling overhead
For a prey to be assailed;
Any fugitive from communal justice is just fine. (31)

Freedom in the above stanza enjoys the status of personification for "Freedom" is said to pursue and flee to "perilous skies" where "hawks" encircle overhead. Freedom represents a young girl child who finds herself in a perilous society where child marriage is the norm. The sky overhead is full of hawks. These hawks are old men who are old enough to be her father. The bird imagery is used to portray the dangerous world into which she is compelled to live. It is the world of men who employ religion and culture to perpetrate crime against the girl child. The hawks are the old men while Freedom is the "prey."

Freedom rejects the nuptial bed of the gerontocrat
The father of the father to her desk-mate
Who sighted her on an unusual school run
When mate's parents were held up
In traffic and at work.
The call for Grandpa to help was not to cradle snatch
But to help out and fill a space that city life created. (31)

The speaker denounces child marriage through the portrayal of an old man who intends to get married to a young girl. The man in question is a "gerontocrat," which presupposes an old political leader in Freedom's village. He is the "father of the father to her desk-mate" (31). This funny epithet emphasises the idea that the old man is a grandfather. Freedom's rejection of this old man reveals her activist consciousness. The poet is by this rejection calling on all young girls who find themselves in this situation to reject child marriage in all its entirety.

What is Freedom to do?
For the father of the father has transformed
Has become the groom seeking the hands
Of a lass about to receive lessons on the floor of the moon
Of one he could sire across multiples generations. (31)

The rhetorical question that begins the above stanza functions as a device to express Freedom's helplessness in the above context. The man who used to come to school to pick Freedom's desk-mate in school has thus "transformed" himself into "the groom"

seeking to marry her. The interesting part is that this man could well be Freedom's great grand-father when their age difference is calculated. What Evwierhoma is trying to do is to depict the absurdity in the union between Freedom and this old man.

Freedom flees and pursues justice
To safety away from a community
Eager for a lavish bride wealth, and not future
She seeks shelter in safer hands,
And the arms of the law.
The law? (31)

That Freedom flees from the community, where child marriage fetches the parents a large amount for bride wealth, shows the repulsive nature of the practice. The reader is by this action inspired to emulate it by refusing to condone child marriage. The girl child is being provided a role model in Freedom. She also pursues justice against men who compel young ladies to get married instead of investing in their future. Child marriage destroys the aspiration for education and the preservation of the future of a girl child. They have to relocate from this wicked community that has entrenched the culture or practice of child marriage. By way of indirect suggestion, the poet advocates the need for legal protection of children from getting married at their young age. Law makers are encouraged to make laws to protect children.

Evwierhoma also denounces the defilement of babies by their caregiver. It is impossible to read the poem "Shearers of destiny" (33), without noticing the anger of the poet against those who defile babies:

But my pen on its own terms
Moves towards the thieves of time
Shearers of innocence
Ravagers of maidenhead
Without restraint
Lustful, and lacking in reason. (33)

The image of animal husbandry is employed comparing the defilement of babies to the process of shearing a sheep. In the case of a sheep, the shearing does no harm to it, but in the case of babies, it robs them of their innocence. Thus this is an apt metaphor used to depict the ruin that it brings to the babies. The speaker's act of name calling is a technique employed to denounce those who practise it. The speaker calls them, "Ravagers of maidenhead," because they force themselves on neonatals who are yet to develop strong bones. Also, they are called "Lustful" because their lust for sex has propelled them to defile babies. Lastly, these men are described as those who lack reason because no reasonable man will condescend to defile a baby.

Mr. So and So, who did you climb?
Confess before the gavel falls.
"MY daughter," he stutters
"In her diaper," the fiend replies
Seeking where to hide his face. (33)

This stanza introduces the reader to another situation: this time, a father is questioned in court as to the identity of his victim. The poet's use of dramatic monologue is appropriate. The speaker is seen asking the questions and also answering them. Through this we are to read the attitude of the speaker to what the man has done. The first question raises much indignation against the action of the men. The speaker wants to know the identity of the person that the addressee has defiled: "who did you climb?" Thus "climb" is a euphemism for sex. The blunt answer: "my daughter" is meant to show the speaker's condemnation of what the man has done. That the man "stutters" in reply

to the question shows that the act itself is shameful. Also that the victim is still in "her diaper" further amplifies the indignity of the act. Also, the addressee is unable to "hide his face" because he has ruined his reputation.

> Mr man, what did you seek between the thighs of young bones?
> Unable to utter one word of consent, why make the frame crack
> Under you?
> What was your penis searching for in the pubis of a neonate
> Left in your care by her mother, your consort? (33)

Through rhetorical question, the speaker condemns the act of defilement: (sex with babies). The tone and diction convey the sense of shock at the shameful behaviour of the man. To further show how infants are vulnerable to defilement, the speaker queries the rationale behind having sex with a child whose bones are young. Secondly, the said victim of sex cannot even "utter one word of consent" and as such, any sex with her is undoubtedly a crime. The speaker goes further to present the danger of such an act. There is the fear of the baby's frames cracking or being broken when the man's weight is brought on the child. The height of the abomination is found in the last line of the poem. Here the speaker is shocked that the man could have sex with a "neonate" who invariably is a child left in his care by the mother (incidentally, his wife). Thus the child is his daughter.

This section has shown that daughters in Nigeria are vulnerable to sexual harassment, child marriage and defilement. The poet is shocked that such acts still persist in our society without serious sanction. The poet presents highly educated academics condescending to the level of sexual predators. We see elders seeking to get married to very young girls. Finally, the situation where a parent has sex with a baby is not only condemnable, it is also reprehensible. The poet indirectly calls for immediate action in order to stem the tide of sexual perversion in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The poems of Obi and Evwierhoma have been examined in this paper from the perspective of postcolonial alterity to present the vulnerable people in our society. Three main classes of people are identified and presented through poetic devices to portray these sets of people in their poems. The devices include rhetorical questions, euphemism, irony, metaphor, repetition, and personification to present a realistic picture of the vulnerable people in our society. The main thrust of this paper is to portray three classes of vulnerable groups in our society who need urgent help, revitalization, and resuscitation. Many of these people are young girls who are subjected to sexual harassment. The poets caution against their being hunted for sex. The poets reprove the government for entrenching despoliation and impoverishment of Niger Delta land and people. The poets are of the opinion that society will be better if the condition of vulnerable lives are improved.

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