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Symbolism as Meaning Strategy in Tanure Ojaide's Poetry: A Linguistic Approach

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Abstract

This paper examined animal symbolism in three collections of poetry written by Tanure Ojaide, namely, *The Fate of Vulture and Other Poems*, *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *The Tale of the Harmattan*. Data for analysis were twenty-one (21) poems purposively selected from the three collections, using a linguistic approach as the theoretical framework. Findings from the study revealed that through the predominant use of material verbs and few instances of mental processes, Ojaide uses the actions and activities of both predatory and minute animals in the collections to symbolise the barbarity, brutality and tyranny of Nigerian/African political leadership. The

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findings also showed that the poet employs imperative jussive mood to signal his revolutionary intent and ideological vision, and uses hyponymy to reveal how aquatic creatures, different species of fish and birds function as symbols and metaphors to recount the idyllic scenes and harmonious co-existence in the ecosystem in the Niger Delta region before oil and gas exploration and its subsequent devastation and degradation due to oil spillage and gas blowouts. The paper concluded that the use of animal symbols as a meaning strategy in versification probes into the inner consciousness of the poet and enriches the reader's linguistic knowledge.

Keywords: animal, symbolism, poetry collections, linguistic approach, Tanure Ojaide

1. Introduction

Employing animal characters to represent human attributes and qualities is a universal and timeless creative enterprise. Animal symbolism is a literary-aesthetic device that pervades and animates the fabric of literary texts. The irresistible urge to creatively explain things and phenomena around their milieu compels creative writers to deploy animal symbols in their artistic expressions. Through the use of animal symbols, they recreate and re-enact human follies and experiences as demonstrated by Orwell's (1945) allegorical novel *Animal Farm*.

Within the context of African literature, there is a pervasive use of animal images and symbolism to depict characterization and thematic exploration in Nigerian literary discourse. Animals are employed to represent and symbolize strength, bravery, brute force, humility, trickery, massiveness, destruction and victims of human greed and callousness (Ngwoke 2017), etc. For artistic and aesthetic considerations and to further pursue thematic preoccupations and social visions,

animal symbols are used by Nigerian writers in works such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1967); Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are not Blame* (1964) and *Kurumi* (1971); Clark-Bekederomo's *Song of the Goat* (1961) and *Ozidi* (2001); Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* (1984) and *Songs of the Season* (1990a); Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998), *The Tale of Harmattan* (2007), *Waiting for The Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008), etc.

Symbolism is an artistic device that is employed in day-to-day human interaction for effective and meaningful communication. According to Hawthorn (1992), symbols stand for or suggest something; they represent ideas, associations and forms in ordinary life. This view is equally expressed in Abrams and Harpham's (2012) definition of symbol as "anything which signifies something else" (p. 393). In this sense, they opine that words are symbols because they are used to represent ideas, thoughts and feelings and they stand for referents in the outside world. They explain further that a symbol is a matter of social convention and does not have one fixed association across all cultures. Wales (2001) and DeZalia and Moeschberger (2014) affirm the notion of social convention of symbols, emphasising that a symbol stands for something else within a speech community. That is, what a symbol represents differs from culture to culture. For example, while black garment is a symbol of mourning in British culture, it is the ideal mode of dressing in Arab culture, particularly in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the act of kneeling down by the girls and prostrating by the boys are highly venerated as a mode of greeting and a symbol of respect among the Yoruba of South-West Nigeria. Such a form of greeting would be despised and condemned among the Arabs. Wales (2001) is right, therefore, when she says "different domains within each culture evolve their own special sets of symbols or symbolism"

(p. 380).

Literature explores and draws on general symbols. When a symbol is deployed in literary discourse, it has an aesthetic and rhetorical appeal that reinforces the message of the literary writer. Such symbols are termed conventional/traditional/public or private/personal (Ngwoke 2017: 122). According to Louis (2013), as cited by Ngwoke (2017), “conventional or traditional literary symbols work in much the same way, because they have a previously agreed upon meaning” (p. 123). For example, conventional or public symbols include spring, which is a symbol of life and birth; winter as that of death; rose as that of beauty and love; gold of riches; the cross of Christianity; and the crescent moon and star of Islam.

Abrams and Harpham (2012) elucidate that several poets of the *Romantic Period* exploited private and personal symbols in their poetry to elicit new meaning of “rich suggestiveness rather than explicit signification” (p. 397). These poets are referred to as symbolists and they include W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, E. E. Cummings and Edgar Wallace (Wales 2001, Abrams & Harpham 2012). In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka employs ‘the lion’ as a private and personal symbol because it does not symbolise strength and vitality; rather, it is assigned another meaning, which is age and vitality in the person of Baroka (Ngwoke 2017). According to Dobie (2009), personal symbols have the capacity to enrich our reading and understanding by yielding interesting meaning, especially if knowledge of context is deployed to interpret such symbols.

Thus, context is very crucial in symbol interpretation. Boulton (1982) and Mach (1993), cited by Dezalia and Moeschberger (2014), highlight the importance of context in understanding symbols. According to Boulton (1982), the same word does not carry the same

association or ideas when used in different contexts. So, the interpretation of a symbol is context-dependent, whether through the context of the situation or the context of culture. Based on contextual information, Dezalia and Moeschberger (2014) aver that symbols are used or deployed in discourse to attain certain communicative functions. In their analysis of symbols within post-violence and reconciliation settings like Rwanda, they assert that symbols perform historical, cultural, social and psychological functions, that is, emotional attachment. In its more extended usage, Boulton (1982) and Ferber (2013) explain further that many of the symbols in literary texts come close to figures like metaphor, simile, personification, imagery, allusion and synecdoche. This present study investigates animal symbols in Ojaide's poetry collections, and that devices like metaphor and personification will be treated as symbols.

2. Literature Review

Tanure Ojaide is one of the accomplished Nigerian/African contemporary poets and novelists who hails from the Niger Delta region. He has written over fifteen collections of poetry and five novels. He has also won national and international poetry awards. Ojaide has enjoyed critical attention as scholars have embarked on both linguistic and literary analyses of his works, particularly his poetry collections. For example, critics such as Olafioye (2000), Bodunde (2001, 2002), Eka (2002), Okome (2002), Bamidele (2003), Awhefeada (2007), Okuyade (2008), Orabueze (2008), Akano (2012), Maledo (2019), Zukogi (2018), Orhero and Udo (2019), Onwuka et al. (2019), Abdurraheem (2020), and Abba and Onyemachi (2020), etc. have carried out extensive research works on Tanure Ojaide's

poetry. For analysis and interpretation of his works, theories and frameworks ranging from sociological school of literary criticism, new historicism, archetypal school of literary criticism, existentialism, ecocriticism, ecolinguistics and linguistic stylistic approaches have been employed by scholars to espouse the themes of economic exploitation, social injustice, tyrannical leadership, environmental degradation and pollution in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger-Delta. However, for space consideration, only the recent publications will be reviewed in this sub-section.

Orhero and Udo (2019) examine the motif of disillusionment and absurdity in Tanure Ojaide's *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008) and *The Beauty I Have Seen* (2011). They apply the philosophical theory of existentialism, which examines the place and conditions of human existence in the universe and the seeming meaninglessness of the universe. Based on the content analysis of the selected poems from the two texts, the authors observe that Ojaide expresses profound philosophical insights that reflect the Casmus' Myth of Sisyphus which suggests that despair, disappointment, hopelessness, pessimism, depression, fear and uncertainty constitute the pervading negativities that characterise man's existence in the universe. However, applying the literary theory of historicism, Onwuka et al. (2019) take a divergent view of the present sordid condition of human existence, particularly as it applies to social existence in Nigeria. By employing the theory of historicism in the analysis of some selected poems in Ojaide's *The Endless Song*, they interrogate the interconnection between literature, history and society and relate contemporary socio-political upheavals in the society to Nigeria's historical trajectory. They firmly assert that political misrule, leadership ineptitude, socio-economic despoliation and environmental devastation of the Niger Delta area are factors that precipitate worsening human conditions,

which stagnate all efforts at attaining sustainable development and economic well-being of the Nigerian society.

Applying a linguistic model, Maledo's (2019) paper partially shares the views expressed by Onwuka et al. (2019) as he links the subject matter of environmental devastation to spineless, visionless and corrupt leadership. He studies graphological devices in three collections of poems written by Tanure Ojaide: *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998) and *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007) and observes that Ojaides uses graphological devices such as the comma, full stop and capital letters in a distinctive manner to condemn and protest the annihilation of his ancestral Niger Delta home, grossly battered by oil and gas exploitation and exploration. He concludes that graphological deviations investigated in the analysed poems foreground the deviant temperaments of Nigerian political leaders.

Similarly, the devastating effects and appalling consequences of oil and gas exploration and exploitation on the Niger Delta landscape are the focus of the research articles written by Abba and Onyemachi (2020) and Abdurraheem (2020). While Abba and Onyemachi (2020) apply eco-alienation theory to study Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood*, Abdurraheem (2020) deploys the tenets of ecolinguistic theory to examine ecological concerns in five collections of poetry written by Tanure Ojaide, namely, *The Blood of Peace* (1990), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998), *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* (1998), *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), and *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008). Although there are differences in their choice of theoretical framework and the number of texts analysed, both studies are thematically related as they mainly investigated ecological issues that have led to gradual devastation of the ecosystem, the gradual loss of

biodiversity (Abdurraheem 2020: 176), social disillusionment and mushrooming of militant groups.

Sokol and Pevčíková (2021) and Orhero and Okon (2021) are interesting works on animal symbolism in literary texts, and both works are quite related to the focus of this current study. For example, Sokol and Pevčíková (2021) examine animal symbolism in the works of H.P. Lovecraft, a popular novelist on cosmic horror. According to the authors, Lovecraft predominantly employs animal symbolism, particularly the cat, dog, snake, fish and frog to convey concepts and ideas, which are characteristics of cosmic horror. In addition, his depiction and presentation of animals in short stories are derived from culture and mythology and are dictated by his knowledge and experience of animals, personal attitudes, belief and ideology (He is an avowed critic of anthropomorphism) towards them. Based on his childhood experience, he adores cats in all his novels, investing them with mysterious and supernatural powers, particularly in *The Cats of Ulthar* (Sokol & Pevčíková 2021), while the dogs are depicted as “herald or bringer of bad omens, sinister of dark forces, malefactors with no notion of positive traits in them” (Sokol & Pevčíková 2021: 45).

A study that is closer to the focus of this paper is Orhero and Okon (2021). Orhero and Okon examine the use of animal symbolism and human-animal metamorphosis in Joe Ushie’s *Popular Stand and Other Poems* and *Lambs in the Shrine*. Couched in the form of satire, the authors assert that Joe Ushie employs animals such as the bat, owl and ‘the hens that crowed cock-like in the yard’ as archetypal representations of weird and usual happenings such as the horrible and terrifying social conflicts that engulfed Africa in the 90s, while he depicts the lion and vulture to characterise Nigerian political leaders as wicked, oppressive and tyrannical. However, in *Popular Stand and*

other Poems, the authors also show that the human-animal representation stresses the ecological harmony and balance between man and nature: the chicken is used as an archetype of innocence and security, the bedbug as representation of Niger Delta fauna preservation, the elephant, bat and cock celebrate the idyllic scenes, natural order and theistic disposition in the region before Shell Petroleum broke the bond between man and his ecological creatures.

The foregoing paragraphs have shown that though Ojaide has received critical attention, research studies, to the best of the author's knowledge, have not focused attention on the employment of animal symbols in his poetry collections. This is a lacuna which this paper intends to fill. Thus, this paper examines how Tanure Ojaide employs animal symbols as a vehicle of communication, aesthetic and rhetorical appeal that explicate his thematic exploration, ideological concerns and authorial style in the selected poetic texts using a linguistic approach. The objectives of the paper are to: (i) investigate the participant roles that are assigned to the animals in the poetic texts; (ii) examine the activities and actions (processes, verbs) that are performed by these animals in the selected texts; (iii) explicate the kinds (hyponymy) of animals that are used to depict human qualities and attributes; and (iv) appraise how the interpersonal relationship (mood patterns) between the animals and the poet personae account for his ideological orientation.

3. Methodology

Tanure Ojaide has authored more than fifteen (15) collections of poetry. Of these collections, three were selected for analysis for this paper. The three collections are *The Fate of Vulture and Other Poems*

(1990), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998) and *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007). The three collections, henceforth, will be referred to as *The Fate*, *Delta Blues* and *The Tale* respectively. These three collections were purposively sampled because they provide significant insights and yield valuable information to the objectives of the study. From the three collections, twenty-one (21) poems were selected: seven (7) poems from *The Fate*, eleven (11) from *Delta Blues* and three (3) from *The Tale*. Each of the poems so selected contains instances of animal symbols that offer profound understanding of Ojaide's thematic experimentation, ideological vision and authorial style. The linguistic concepts that were analysed in the selected poems are participant/semantic roles, processes, hyponymy and imperative mood structures, using Halliday's ideational and interpersonal metafunctional components as an analytical framework.

For the data analytical procedure, first, the paper analysed samples of hyponymy in *The Fate* and *Delta Blues*. Since the participant/semantic roles and processes are components of experiential functions, which are interrelated and interconnected (though independent of each other), these two linguistic concepts were meticulously analysed in the three selected texts in the other in which they are listed above. For analysis of mood patterns, samples were drawn from *The Fate* and *The Tale*.

4. Analytic Framework

The linguistic notions that are adopted for analysis of the selected poems are semantic/participant roles, processes, hyponymy and imperative mood structures. These variables are used to analyse the animal symbols woven into the fabric of the selected poems, and

which serve are semiotic codes through which meaning is scientifically negotiated and derived. In addition, Babalola (2021), Ogunsiji and Aluya (2022), Kausch (2023), Aina and Anowu (2023) and Aluya (2023) are significant studies that employ linguistic concepts and approaches that have direct relevance to the present study. For example, like this present work, Ogunsiji and Aluya's (2022) analytical framework is anchored on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar.

Language constructs social events and happenings and accounts for the participants that are involved in these social engagements. Participants in social discourse can be people, places, animals, and concrete and abstract things. Ojaide's poetic texts are social discourses that involve participants, among them are people and animals. The animals in the poetic texts are employed as symbols which represent the events and activities engaged in by human beings; they are, therefore, participants in the discourse.

The participant constituent describes the various participant or semantic roles in a situation, that is, states, events and actions (Jackson 1990: 8). The participants are realised by the Nominal Group, which revolves around the process (verb) and interacts with it through a variety of participant roles (Ogunsiji & Aluya 2022), or 'thematic relations' (Toolan 1998: 77) or 'thematic roles' (Fromkin et al. 2011: 163). These semantic relations include roles such as Actor, Agent, Goal, Senser, Carrier, Sayer, Source, Experiencer, Instrument, Theme, etc. According to Fromkin et al. (2011), a particular thematic role that is assigned to a verb can be traced back to the components of the verb's meaning. This suggests that the selection of any of the thematic roles rests with the process (that is, the verb).

The process is the verbal group which encodes the flow of events. They are primarily events, states and actions that the participants are

involved in, and typically realised or expressed by the verbal group in the clause. Process types are classified differently among scholars. However, Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) classification will be adopted in this study. These six classifications are material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural and existential processes. For the purpose of this study, only the first two will be analysed in this work. Material process verbs describe what is happening or being done; it is packed with actions, while the mental process verbs capture the state of the mind in psychological events. It represents something that goes on in the internal world of the mind.

Thus, the participant/semantic roles, the process and the circumstance capture the experiential meaning which represents the external world of things, events, qualities, etc. and the internal world of thoughts, beliefs and feelings (Butt et al. 1995). So, experiential function accounts for the 'content' meaning of "who did what to whom, under what circumstance" (Butt et al. 1995: 41, Thompson 2004). The circumstances, which are adverbial groups and prepositional phrases, are out of the scope of this study.

The different kinds of animals that populate Ojaide's poetic texts and their qualities and attributes establish the relevance of hyponymy, a concept in meaning or lexical relations, to this present study. The relationship of hyponymy captures the idea of "is a kind of" (Fromkin et al. 2011: 165), the notion of inclusion, which implies membership (Lyons 1977, Palmer 1981). For example, the meanings of 'hyena' and 'tiger' are included in the meaning of *animal*; or hyena and tiger are co-hyponyms of the superordinate term animal. Hyponymy is a meaning relation property employed to achieve cohesion of ideas and thoughts that are expressed in texts.

Mood is concerned with interpersonal metafunction and "carries the burden of the clause as interactive events" (Halliday & Matthiessen

2004: 106). It relates meaning to tenor—the relationship between the interactants in this discourse—and is broadly classified into indicative and imperative moods. The indicative mood is expressed in the declarative and interrogative clauses, while the imperative mood, which is the focus of the paper, is expressed in the imperative clause. Imperative covers command, directive, order, request and instruction; and is open to jussive (the writer or the reader or both of them are involved in the action) and non-jussive (the writer or the reader or both of them are left out in the action; Osisanwo 2006: 9).

5. Result and Discussion

The fauna of the African landscape animates Ojaide's artistic creation. Animal symbolism woven into the textual fabric serves as threads of communication that reveal the brazen ugliness and social miasma in the national polity. Put differently, the linguistic make-up of Ojaide's artistry is replete with animal symbols and imagery. First, the semantic relation of hyponymy will be analysed.

5.1. Hyponymy

Almost all the poems in the selected texts are skillfully embroidered with names of animals that evoke traditional African folklores and sensibilities, which have functional significance and relevance in our contemporary society. These animals include hyena, lion, leopard, elephants, fish, bird, serpent, eagle, vulture, bedbug, butterfly, tortoise, scorpion, dog, range chicken, hare, cockroach, goat, cock, crow, owls, monkey, spider, earthworm, snails, froglets, skipper, beetles, rats, mice, black ant, flies, crabs, etc. The kinds or

membership of these animals can be roughly classified into: wild versus domestic animals, birds versus reptiles, marine versus land animals, huge/large/massive versus miniature/tiny animals. This membership can also be grouped into animals that are invested with positive and negative connotations.

The textual ambience of *The Fate* indicates that Ojaide deploys names, features and characteristics of these animals as meaningful codes, either as symbols or as metaphors to underscore, according to Okuyade (2008), “the socio-political context of the bizarre asymmetric correlation between the high-ups and the low downs” (p. 127). These symbols project the images of tyranny and oppression and also reinforce the cultural component of his poetry. For instance, ‘leopard,’ ‘bedbug,’ ‘chickens,’ ‘tortoise,’ ‘spider,’ ‘hyena,’ ‘vulture,’ ‘serpent,’ ‘mouse,’ ‘scorpion,’ etc., are, within the social context of *The Fate*, clothed with negative connotations. They are symbols of tyranny, oppression, ruthlessness and brutality, particularly the hyena and the vulture, which are considered as predatory animals. Virtually, in all the poems where hyena is mentioned, it symbolises the Nigerian/African ruling class. For example:

- (1) When the hyena’s after you
with a mouth saddled with steel (Ojaide 1990: 72)

The image of the hyena, a co-hyponymy of wild and land animals, as a ruthless, brutal and devouring creature pervades every poem where it is employed. Numerically, the hyena is repeated eight (**8**) times in this collection and has the highest number of occurrence of all the predatory animals that are repeated in this volume. By numerical and even stylistic significance, it foregrounds political oppression and leadership dictatorship. In a tone soaked in anger,

Ojaide raves:

- (2) May this arrow-flight pick wings from
the angry wind and pluck
the spider in the centre of his web,
the tortoise in his moving fortress,
the hyena in his bone-furnished den (Ojaide 1990: 16)

Here, the predatory instinct of the hyena, with its natural tendency to mercilessly crush and devour its victim, collocates with “bone-furnished den.” The apprehension of the claws of death clasp callously on the victim’s neck is vividly implied in “the hyena in his bone-furnished den.”

In addition, the theme of greed, looting and profligacy of national wealth are clearly stated in “The Fate of Vulture”:

- (3) The chief and his council, a flock of flukes
gambolling in the veins of fortune
Range chickens, they consume and scatter ... (Ojaide 1990: 11)

‘Range chickens’ and ‘flock of flukes’ are metaphors and symbols that aptly represent the leaders and describe their endemic corrupt tendencies. In addition, the image of incompetent and mediocre leaders, whether appointed or elected, is indirectly suggested in a ‘flock of fluke.’ This symbol, and its interpretation, extends to the verb ‘gambolling,’ which implies a visionless and rudderless leadership, without a clear direction and quality knowledge required of good governance.

However, a second reading of some poems in *The Fate* reveals that Ojaide adopts the innate characteristics of some animals to celebrate

some key public figures within the African context. In “Okigbo listens to new poets” (p. 52), he compares the crowing of a cock with the caressing tone of a bird-song. Put differently, Ojaide celebrates the poetic ingenuity and sublime creative imagination of the late Christopher Okigbo as a poet that cannot be matched by contemporary poets. He refers to Okigbo’s sophisticated rhythmic lines as ‘a bird-song,’ while other poetry, particularly contemporary poetry collections, including his own collections of poetry, as the ‘cock’s crow that wakes but doesn’t caress the ears’ (p. 52), ‘the butterfly which calls himself a bird,’ but cannot sing a bird-song’ (p. 52). Thus, the cock and butterfly are co-hyponyms of bird.

Similarly, in ‘Orphans of Hope’ (p. 22), Ojaide mourns the tragic demise of Thomas Sankara, a former military head of Burkina Faso:

(4) Surely, the nest of faith is torn to shreds (Ojaide 1990: 22)

In this line, he refers to Thomas Sankara as a bird, though this is indirectly stated through the use of the word ‘nest,’ which is connected to bird. In addition, the poet’s hope for a new generation of rulers and leaders is metaphorically rendered in “New Vision” (p. 35) as ‘a nest of new birds.’ So, ‘nest of faith’ and ‘a nest of new birds’ are metonyms, as used in the above lines, and stylistically function as socio-cultural symbols that accentuate the poetic exploits and astute revolutionary leadership of Christopher Okigbo and Thomas Sankara, respectively.

Like in *The Fate*, animal imagery and symbols represent linguistic codes for effective meaning strategy in the discourse structures of *Delta Blues*. Ojaide explores animal symbols drawn from African cosmology in order “to enrich our reading and understanding of poems” (Dobie 2009: 56). For example, in “When green was the

lingua franca” (pp. 12–14), Ojaide deploys the names of kinds of fish and names of other tiny animals as a communicative medium to give a scenic and idyllic description of the communal alliance of animals in the Delta. ‘Fish,’ ‘earthworm,’ ‘snails,’ ‘ikere froglets,’ ‘birds,’ ‘egrets,’ ‘skipper fish,’ and ‘glamorous fish’ are used both in their denotative and symbolic references to project the Delta as a ‘home of salt and fish’ and a ‘home of plants and birds.’ This idyllic scenes, bubbling with activities and pleasant memories of bygone communal alliance and harmony between human beings and animals in the ecosystem, are vividly recollected in the expressions: “I remember *erhuvwudjayorho*, such as a glamorous fish” (p. 12); “Snail and *koto* lured me...” (p. 12); “Ikere froglets fell from sky that covered the land with tropical sheets...” (p. 12). These tiny animals are registers of the immediate aquatic creatures which underline the immediate social context unfolding in the poem: that is, the concrete and symbiotic relationship between human beings and animals and the nutritional values of the animals to human creatures before they were wiped out by oil and gas exploration.

In “Wails” (pp. 17–19), “Sleeping in a makeshift” (p. 24) and “Elegy for nine warriors” (pp. 25–28), the poet uses ‘elephant,’ a co-hyponymy of massive beast, ‘eagle’ and ‘eaglets’ as symbols in subtle simplicity to capture the aura of majesty and ebullient disposition of the Ogoni leaders, who were environmental activists. As a former president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Ken Saro-Wiwa is symbolized as an elephant in “Wails,” whose massive presence and majestic posturing can take up more than a hundred spaces, ‘for the elephant never hides.’ Thus, his absence (due to his tragic death), therefore, would make the assembly of ANA incomplete. Ojaide echoes in dirge:

- (5) The world needs to hear this:
there's one absent in the assembly,
the singers will never be complete
without the elephant in their midst. (Ojaide 1998: 17)

The socio-cultural relevance of the elephant, particularly in African cosmology, as an imposing creature with massive strength and keen sense of direction is connotatively and symbolically rendered as a description for Ken Saro-Wiwa. The lexical repetition of elephant in the *Delta Blues*, both as metaphor and symbol, explicates the towering personality of Ken Saro-Wiwa as “an environmental and human rights activist, an administrator, a television producer, a journalist and a prolific author” (Ahworegba 2008: 445). In addition to ‘elephant,’ Ojaide uses the co-hyponyms of bird (eagle and eaglets) as semantic indicators to define the social institution and cultural context of *Delta Blues*.

Ojaide’s lexical armoury targeted at all despotic and oppressive rulers equally contains animal (insects) symbols of miniature creatures, like ‘cockroaches’ and ‘flies,’ which are co-hyponyms of insects. The poet holds the late maximum military ruler in derision as he (the poet) describes him as ‘old cockroach in the groins of Aso Rock’ (p. 25), ‘commander of roaches’ (p. 25) and ‘cockroach in the groins of Aso Rock’ (p. 42); which are phrasal invectives meant to denounce, diminish and deflate the status and office of the then military ruler, General Sanni Abacha. In another context of *Delta Blues*, ‘flies’ represent bootlickers, sycophants and acolytes who drum support for and shower accolades on the maximum ruler. The ‘flies’ are the packs of praise-singers who buzz and serenade the Chieftain Lord, their benefactor, and whose political activity is portrayed in the material process verb ‘follow’:

- (6) As for the flies that follow, let them beware
of being buried alive with their benefactor vulture!
(Ojaide 1998: 42)

In addition, Ojaide describes the legions of ‘slick tongue praise singers’ and ‘the smiling, but shameless pack of advisers’ to ‘the usurper-chieftain’ as ‘roundtable flies’ (p. 39) and ‘a company of flies’ (p. 34), a symbol that stresses and depicts their swarming numerical strength.

Within the socio-cultural context of *Delta Blues*, the dog is depicted, not as a friend or companion to man but a scavenging creature, the likes of the hyena, trained to rend into shreds all perceived opponents and foes. The symbolic force of the dog as a devouring beast, let loose by a dementia overlord, permeates “Delta Blues” (pp. 21–23), “Hallucination” (p. 33), “Fetish country” (p. 39), “Army of microbes” (p. 43) and “Exceptions” (p. 49). In these poems, the dog is depicted as the accomplice of the ‘barbarian chief’ and ‘usurper-chieftain.’ In other words, the dog stands for the Killing Squad that crushes the lives of protesters, agitators and the opponents. Ojaide, in “Army of Microbes,” recounts an appalling experience:

- (7) To the usurper-chieftain who has set his rabid guard dogs
against street of impoverished one ...
To the Hyena and his cavalry of hangmen
that litter the landscape with mounds ...
I say, Shame on you and your kind. (Ojaide 1998: 43)

Thus, the accomplices of the state-orchestrated murder launched at all perceived opponents are specially trained soldiers, symbolically presented as different species of dog such as ‘rabid guard dogs’ (p.

43), ‘black guard dogs’ (p. 33) and ‘the uniformed dogs’ (p. 21), that are ‘barking and biting protesters brandishing green shrubs’ (p. 21). The repetitions of the voiced bilabial plosive /b/ in ‘barking,’ ‘biting’ and ‘brandishing,’ the voiceless plosive /p/ in ‘protesters’ and the voiced velar plosive /g/ in ‘green’ are instructive. Phonostylistically, these plosive phonemes perform mimetic functions as they echo the barking of the dogs, symbolised as the trained hit squad.

5.2. Participant/Semantic Roles and Processes

In this sub-section the participants and the processes are analysed concurrently. In “The Fate of vulture” (Ojaide 1990: 11–12), Ojaide sings:

- (8) The chief and his council, a flock of flukes
 gambolling in the veins of fortune
 Range chickens, they consume and scatter.... (Ojaide 1990: 11)

Figure 1 shows the participants and the processes in the above excerpt.

Figure 1. Participant, Process and Circumstance

The chief and his council, a flock of flukes	gambolling	in the veins of fortunes
Actor/Agent	Material	Circumstance

Here, ‘Range chickens’ is a Nominal Group that functions as the Actor/Agent, and “consume” and “scatter,” are material process verbs that suggest financial waste, wilful prodigality and personal aggrandizement of the ruling class. This interpretation is further enhanced by the simple present tense of the verbs ‘consume’ and

‘scatter,’ which denote the habitual tendencies of the ruling class to always squander, lavish and waste the national resources, a tendency that is still prevalent among the political class.

Interestingly, the poet creatively exploits minute creatures such as ‘bedbug’ as a Nominal Group and symbol to denote the insidious and clandestine activities of the leadership class. The systematic decimation of the society as a result of high-handedness of the military leadership is likened to the sucking and parasitic disposition of the bedbug, a species of insects that sucks and burrows into the skin of its victims. Again, in “When soldiers are diplomats,” Ojaide warns:

- (9) The bedbug does not care
 for the taste of your blood
 And the bedbug, that smug cannibal
 doesn't care for the rank smell of blood (Ojaide 1990: 4–5)

In the above lines, because the verb ‘care’ describes the state of mind and psychological event, the participant ‘bedbug’ is assigned the semantic role of **Senser**. In this context, ‘bedbug’ is used as a symbol to elucidate the vicious circle of social ills the military had perpetrated in the society and the Predicator, ‘does not care,’ is a mental process verb that delineates the accompanying harrowing experience and psychological trauma. Hence, the poet labels the military institution as “that smug cannibal” (p. 5). In the 80s and late 90s, military tyranny and despotism and its ravaging effect on the nation’s psyche dominated Nigerian poetry collections: Osundare (1990b), Ojaide (1998), Amali (2000), Adeoti (2005), Ododo (2012), and so on. For example, in *Waiting Laughters* (1990b), Osundare writes:

(10) Waiting

still waiting

like the strident summon of hasty edicts,
bellowed by the smoking lips of vulgar guns,
signed in blood, unleashed in the crimson spine
of trembling streets.

These are season of barking guns

These are season of barking guns. (Osundare 1990b: 49)

‘Hasty edicts,’ ‘vulgar guns’ and ‘barking guns’ are instruments of military brutality, and the material process verbs ‘bellowed’ and ‘unleashed’ are collocates that complement the ghoulish and gloomy atmosphere created by ‘the barking guns.’ Thus, the themes of suppression, tyranny and despotism in the garb of military oligarchy run through the fabric of Nigerian poetry, and in particular *The Fate* for the collection was published in 1990, the nadir of military rulership in Nigeria and in some African countries. The animal imagery and symbol, therefore, set up semantic categories that function as sociopolitical symbols in order to give concrete descriptions, mental depression and interpretations of the idea, object or people they represent. Olafioye (2000), citing Ogede (1995), writes:

- (11) Ojaide uses other animal images to reinforce his picture of African leaders as gluttons, ‘Tigers,’ ‘Vulture,’ ‘armed robbers,’ ‘fowls’ are terms that denote the barbarity of those who should direct the affairs of their nation with humane feelings, but have turned out to be the nearest threat to peace in the land... (p. 49)

In “Elegy for nine warriors,” Ojaide passionately reveals and

foregrounds the awful manner of Ken Saro-Wiwa's death, using the image of a falling eagle:

- (12) He has brought down the eagle
 and now plucks feather of the totem bird
 Does he not know of forbidden acts
 that he dismembers the nine eaglets? (Ojaide 1990: 28)

Figure 2 presents the semantic roles assigned to the participants and the processes performed in one of the clauses in the excerpt.

Figure 2. Semantic Role

He	has brought down	the eagle
Actor/Agent	Process: material	Goal

The above lines produce semantic heightening, a mark of creativity typical of Ojaide's linguistic and authorial style. The material process verbs 'brought down,' 'plucks' and 'dismember' establish paradigmatic ties both as synonyms and collocates of 'die.' But 'dismember' delineates and reinforces the meaning of the other two as collocates of death; where 'the eagle,' 'the totem bird' and 'the nine eaglets' carry the semantic labels of Goal that receive the actions of 'brought down,' 'plucks' and 'dismember' respectively. The Nominal Group 'forbidden acts,' labelled as **Phenomenon** because the verb 'know' is a mental process, coheres with the verbs (brought down, pucks and dismember) to complement the image of death that looms in the horizon.

From the point of view of African cosmology, the 'totem bird' is comparatively likened to the python in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) and the guiding Spirit Snake in

Camara Laye's *The African Child* (1954). In this context, the 'totem bird' is an animal that is treated with affection and whose 'falling' in African cosmology is considered a taboo and forbidden act. Against this background, Ojaide symbolises Ken Saro-Wiwa as an eagle, a 'totem bird,' and the other Ogoni agitators as eaglets; and as such their killing is considered as 'forbidden acts.' The participant in these performative verbs is denoted by an anaphoric reference 'he', which refers to 'the butcher of Abuja.' From the context of the situation, 'totem bird' (the superordinate term for eagle and eaglets) and 'eagle' refer connotatively to Ken-Saro-Wiwa, and 'eaglets' to both Wiwa and the other eight agitators. The universal image of the eagle/eaglets as a species of bird with a strong muscular instinct and faster but steady flight is symbolically linked to the enduring steadfastness, powerful voice and energetic prowess of the Ogoni leaders as they remained undaunted and unruffled even on the gallows of death.

While the 'elephant,' 'eagle,' 'eaglets' and 'bird' assume positive connotations in "Wails" and "Elegy for nine warriors" respectively, 'cockroach,' 'boa-constrictor,' 'vulture,' 'hyena,' 'dog' and 'flies' are presented in negative lights. For example, the symbol of vulture and hyena in *Delta Blues* is intertextually linked to the ideas and themes Ojaide expresses in *The Fate*. As predatory animals with a carnivorous instinct, the vulture and hyena in *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, like in *The Fate of Vulture and Other Poems*, are symbolic representations of tyranny, oppression, brutality and even death. In addition to our knowledge of Abuja as the seat of power, Ojaide gives weird and jittery descriptions of the capital city, particularly Aso Rock, using predatory animal symbols:

- (13) this is where the hyena's den is guarded by rings of packs
 this is where the hyena cornered the hare
 and swallowed it, leaving no scent for a trace
 this is where the boa-constrictor strangles its catch.

(Ojaide 1998: 41)

These lines are dense 'undergrowth' of lexemes of death. The material process verbs 'cornered,' 'swallowed' and 'strangles' are, based on the context of situation, verbs of oppressive grip and actions that collocate with 'kill,' and the participants, that is the Actor/Agent, (hyena and boa-constrictor are symbols for a cruel leader) of these material processes are predatory animals. But in this context, the hyena and the boa-constrictor refer to the same person. The poet describes the late maximum military ruler, the late General Sani Abacha, as the hyena and the boa-constrictor—'a large, strong snake that kills animals and birds by wrapping itself around them and crushing them' (*Oxford Learners Dictionary*, Hornby 2010:157). Thus, 'strangles' and 'catch' aptly illustrate the crushing characteristics and image of the boa-constrictor, while the repetition of 'this is where' in the poem (it is repeated 9 times) echoes the raucous rhythm of death (the murder of Ogoni environmental activists) as the dominant theme of *Delta Blues*.

Comparatively, the hyena is intertextually contextualized as a symbol of cruelty and despotism in the selected texts, particularly in *The Fate* and in *Delta Blues*. For instance, 'the hyena is his bone-furnished den' (*The Fate*, Ojaide 1990: 16), 'the hyena cornered the hare' (*Delta Blues*, Ojaide 1998: 41), 'to the hyena and his cavalry of hangmen' (*Delta Blues*, Ojaide 1998: 43), etc. resonate the tyrannical grip of African/Nigerian political leadership. A similar image of the hyena (and leopard), as a symbol of oppression and tyranny, pervades

other Ojaide's poetry collections. This image is illustrated in "The Evidence of the Hyena," a poem from *The Eagle's Vision*:

- (14) see the leopard
flashing his teeth
atop his victim's bones;
see the hyena
gamboling recklessly
atop his fat loot;
see the brute
drink the blood
of his latest murder. (Ojaide 1987: 21)

The lines above contain a cluster of material and mental processes. In the poem, the hyena and the leopard, the Nominal Group functioning as the **Actor/Agent**, symbolise the tyrannical grip of the political leadership class. This tyrannical hold is depicted in the material process verbs 'flashing,' 'gamboling,' and 'drink,' which all are transitive verbs that extend to another participants (his victim's bones, his fat loot, etc.), which functions as the **Goals** that receive the brutal actions of the leopard, hyena and brute. In addition, the verb "see" is a mental process which reveals the searing mood of the poet and the masses who are the bearers of the brunt of leadership rascality and wickedness. In addition, through the repetition of the mental verb "see," the poet perceives the visual sensation of the suffering masses on account of leadership failure.

Animal symbols also permeate the entire textual fabric of *The Tale*. In "Dots within a cycle" (p. 14), Ojaide illustrates the burning and destruction of animals that were caught under the intense heat of gas flare in his ancestral home, the Niger Delta. He wails:

- (15) Crocodiles lose patience under sustained attack...
A mute parrot amidst blaring flares...
Loud prayers muffle birds singing of dawn. (Ojaide 2007: 14)
The birds and beetles lost their refuge. (Ojaide 2007: 19)

Crocodiles are large reptiles that dwell in rivers and lakes and, in this context, represent other aquatic creatures that are victims of gas flares as a result of oil and gas spillage. The birds and fish are also the worst heat of human callousness and unbridled lust for material wealth as parrots roast “amidst blaring flames” (p. 14), “the apiapia cries hysterically” (p. 19) amidst fumes and “We have plenty of baits but no fish in the water (p. 19). The examples cited here are more of metaphors and personification than symbols that reveal, through the choice of the mental process verbs ‘lose’ and ‘cries,’ the mental agony and trauma in the inner world of the animals that are roasted in the searing flames of human greed. The mental processes also reveal the inner consciousness of the emotional imbalance of the poet who recreates the disruption of the peaceful and communal alliance between humans and their eco-creatures due to oil blowouts and gas flares.

5.3. Mood Structures

In some of the selected poems, Ojaide uses imperative jussive mood to signal his revolutionary intent and ideological orientation. His protest over leadership failure is imprinted on every page of *The Fate* and expressed through a plethora of animal symbols. His anger and impatience for all despots and tyrants are again manifest in “My next step”:

- (16) Let me start to dig the pit that will swallow
the tortoise chieftain and his bundle of tricks;
let angry hands fashion the metal
to rid the land of hyena and his vicious greed. (Ojaide 1990: 21)

Here, the poet echoes his revolutionary and ideological bent, an ideology that is anchored on social justice and revolutionary change, which is reflected in the choice of material process verbs: “start,” “swallow,” “fashion” and “rid” that depict actions. As a social crusader committed to social justice, the poet intends to ‘mow down’ the tortoise and the hyena, which are the symbols for all mindless and corrupt heads, who plunder and pillage the public treasury.

In *The Tale*, particularly in “The mass hunt,” Ojaide varies his use of predatory animals as symbols that denote tyranny, despotism and ruthlessness. In this poem, the destructive antics and burrowing cruelty of diminutive animals such as ‘ants,’ ‘locusts,’ ‘crickets,’ ‘rats,’ ‘fowls,’ ‘fish’ and ‘snakes’ are deployed as symbols of oppression, domination and suppression that must be crushed:

- (17) Let’s drive them into their hole:
ants that condemn our feet for murder
locusts that consume our green
crickets that perforate our plots
rats that bite our soles in deep sleep
fowls that ambush us with droppings
fish that diminish our water resources
snakes that plant their teeth in the field. (Ojaide 2007: 56)

In this poem, however, through the use of imperative jussive mood ‘let’s,’ Ojaide calls for a groundswell and collective change that would

dislodge and sweep away all human obstacles (Actors/Agents of oppression and tyranny symbolised as ants, locusts, crickets, rats, etc.) and their villainous acts and activities (denoted in material process verbs as ‘consume,’ ‘perforate,’ ‘bite’ and ‘ambush’) that curtail the wheel of progress and truncate efforts geared towards to sustainable development. It is a call for a revolutionary change that would dethrone all ravenous tyrants, callous leaders and greedy individuals who devour the commonwealth of the people. This overarching revolutionary change, which typifies Ojaide’s ideological concern and social vision, is suggested in the choice of the material process ‘drive,’ a metaphor for collective action, activity and dynamism.

6. Findings and Conclusion

Analysis of the three selected poetic texts reveals that Ojaide employs conventional or traditional animal symbols to foreground his thematic preoccupations and ideological concerns. For example, the poet uses predatory animals such the tiger, the hyena, the vulture, the dog, the leopard, the boa-constrictor, etc. to represent the barbarity, brutality and cruelty of most Nigerian/African leadership class. This finding tallies with Orhero and Okon (2021) that vulture symbolises the Nigerian political class as wicked, oppressive and tyrannical. The tyrannical hold and villainous acts of the leaders are depicted in the material process verbs like ‘gambolling,’ ‘bite,’ ‘drink,’ ‘flash,’ etc. In addition, the negative connotation of the dog as a representation of Killing Squad meant to crush all perceived enemies in *The Delta Blues* is in tandem with the image of the dog as a sinister of dark forces in the novel of Lovecraft, as reported by Sokol and pevcíková (2021).

Similarly, the burrowing and buffeting effects of tiny animals like

the bedbug, the ant, fish, rat, fly and cockroach have symbolic force in the selected texts as the poet deploys them to represent agents of political oppression and destruction and packs of sycophants and bootlickers. Such destructive tendencies are denoted by material process verbs like ‘consume,’ ‘perforate,’ ‘ambush,’ ‘diminish,’ etc. These animal symbols define socio-political contexts of the selected texts and poems and the thematic thrust and ideological disposition that are expressed in the poems. However, the finding of this paper differs from Orhero and Okon (2021) who claim that in the poems of Ushie the bedbug symbolises the Niger Delta fauna preservation while the cock celebrates the idyllic scenes and natural harmony in the region before the oil and gas exploration and exploitation.

In the same vein, another finding of this study shows that Ojaide employs the conventional and public symbol of the elephant as a huge and massive creature to symbolize the many uncommon attributes and heroic exploits of Ken Saro-Wiwa. In another instance, the poet employs the symbol of different species of birds to comparatively denote notable African heroic personalities. In *Delta Blues*, he represents Saro-Wiwa as an eagle, ‘a totem bird,’ which, based on the socio-cultural context of the poem, must not be killed, and the other Ogoni leaders as eaglets. In *The Fate*, he uses the melodious cadence of the bird as a symbolic element to celebrate the unparalleled poetic sophistication of Christopher Okigbo. Thus, the choice of different species of birds as symbols to eulogize the murdered Ogoni environmental agitators, Thomas Sankara and Christopher Okigbo are dictated by the socio-cultural beliefs of the poet. This comparative context drawn from the selected texts connects the poet’s thematic exploration, socio-cultural orientation and poetic vision.

The foregoing analysis also shows that Ojaide employs animal symbols to expose and excoriate environmental degradation that

precipitate annihilation of the harmonious and peaceful co-existence between human and their eco-creatures due to oil spillage and gas blowouts. The crocodile, parrot, birds and fish are used as personifications and symbols to represent the severe ecological devastation and psychological disequilibrium which dominate Ojaide's thematic explorations. This finding is in tandem with Abdurraheem's (2020) submission that Ojaide uses fish, birds and plants as personifications and symbols to depict environmental degradation, ecosystem devastation and gradual loss of biodiversity. Thus, the choice of mental process verb such as 'lose,' 'remember,' 'cries,' etc. explain the mental agony suffered by the poet, and by extension, the people of the Niger Delta in connection with the devastation of the ecosystem and destruction of biodiversity of the Niger Delta due to oil and gas exploration and exploitation. And lastly, the imperative jussive mood couched in the linguistic expressions "Let me start..." and "Let drive them..." underscore the poet's revolutionary vision and ideological bent for a collective social change that would herald socio-economic and political emancipation from the severe grip of spineless and selfless leadership.

Symbolism, a subclass of semiotics, is a shared linguistic code employed in human communication. It suggests and represents something concrete in the external world. This study has shown that through the employment of conventional animal symbols, Ojaide aptly communicates themes of political oppression, leadership failure and cruelty, ecological devastation, celebration of the indomitable spirits of the Ogoni leaders and the poetic ingenuity of Christopher Okigbo. The symbols equally reveal that the socio-cultural background of the poet assists the reader to probe into the inner consciousness of the poet or writer. In all, the connotative meaning of symbols enriches the reader's linguistic repertoire which he/she deploys to process and

interpret ordinary linguistic exchange and/or literary discourse.

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