



## Ecocriticism, Botanical Imagination, and the Analysis of Plant Life in Joe Ushie's Poetry

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**Abstract.** This paper positioned within the context of ecocriticism, the environment, and literature, argues that Joe Ushie explores botanical imagination and plant life to reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian reality; using some of Ushie's selected poems. This representation is not just depicted to signify death, threat, gloom or to justify an oppressive element of the environment. It is also captured as a healing balm, or an element of the environment that elicits love, creativity, succor, or hope in a dialectical human and environmental relationship. Ushie's poetic advocacy and imaginative thought using plants and their association with human beings, needs more critical focus dwelling within the literary corpus of contemporary studies. Eco-critical advocacy as applied in this paper, deals with how scholars use literature and nature, in relation to plants to investigate and invigorate ecological thought in relation to human issues. Botanical criticism, on the other hand, lays emphasis on the importance of plants in literature and argues that poets imaginatively explore plant life to symbiotically identify and express themselves in their poetry. Ushie's faith in plants lies in the process and cyclical development and representation of Nature as a presence, personality or existence; rather than as mere objects, medicinal herbs or mechanical operators. The main thrust of this paper hinges on plant ecology and its mode of interrelationships within a literary corpus. This paper concludes that Ushie is not just an ecologically conscious. He is also portrayed as a botanically-inclined and aware poet. Thus one perceives a rich ambiance and notable mastery of the flora and plant imagination in his poetry.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Botanical Imagination, Plant Life, Joe Ushie's Poetry.

### 1. Introduction

Joe Ushie, a Third Generation Nigerian Poet, was born in Akorshie, Bendi in Obanliku Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. His poetry is influenced by his rural agrarian background, feeding on nature and the environment. Literature and environmental issues from the ancient times, dovetailed with human activities to give vent to the rich steam of current literary works. The notion of place or home as environment is central to literature, cultural and environmental studies. In the same vein, ecocriticism draws attention to place, as home recognizing the relationship between humans and their environment.

The study of plants and related discourses in consonant with ecocriticism, generally deploys the use of terms such as floral criticism, botanical criticism, vegetal criticism, and Phyto-criticism to explore botanical imagination and its representation in Literature. Eco-critic John Ryan's (2018) *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination*, examines the nexus between plants and poetry. He situates and represents plants in contemporary poetry within the ambit of eco-critical scholarship. Thus the contention of this recent field of studies condemns the lack of importance placed on the study of plants in literature generally. Ecocriticism tasks scholars to mind the manner in which they represent, interact or construct the environment from whatever critical vantage point of view. This theory is a call for commitment and placement of the value of plants to the environment (Buell 1995: 11). Botanical criticism according to John Ryan (2018) is the study and discussion of plant life and environment in literature. Thus he continues

to speed up critical dialogues with biological scientists to ascertain the fidelity of literary advocacy against some ecological realities so also does phyto-criticism engage emergent views and ideas in botanical science and more precisely, on plant neurobiology as part of its analytical slant.

As a botanical-oriented mode of eco-criticism, Phyto-critics maintain and respect plants' otherness, uniqueness, and existence (Tally & Battista, 2016). The phyto-critical impulse of this study rests on the rootedness of the botanical poetry of Joe Ushie in the vibrant materiality of nature as he embraces a conception of the plant as a being, and not just a textual artifice or what Ryan (2018: 13) refers to as an "insensate phenomenon". John Ryan's (2018, 4) has continued to situate plants and their science as a breakthrough in the field of ecocriticism. He opines that plants have a symbiotic and an interdisciplinary relationship with literature as well as man, and the environment. His contention is that critics who believe that botanical life, that is plant life is a lesser being or an inferior element of existence, because it is largely immobile and transfixed, or because it lacks the power of locomotion or expression of words and thoughts, are anthropocentric and human-centric who indulge in propagating human supremacy, falsehood that give plants a second place in the context of existence. These critics believe that human beings are central and the most importantly the dominant entity or element in the universe.

Ushie can be compared to the Romantic Poets of 19th-century English Literature. This is against the backdrop that he developed quite early in life a great love, passion, and affinity with the flora which he taps extensively from its rich sources of inspiration and poetic material. As a boy who grew up in the green pastures of Bendi hills in Nigeria, he is sensitive to the trees, vegetation, and other pastoral elements in his locality. Just like in ancient Greece and the early British Romantic Poets. Ushie found solace and healing in nature, such as the trees, plants, rivers, and the green pastures of the Bendi environment. Voros (1997: 2) affirms that the marriage between plants and poetry began in ancient Greece tradition with the publication of the poem, "Apollo", written by Ovid. In Japan, for instance, with the Zen monks and haiku poets, flowers and plants occupy a special place in their literary creativity. The English poets are constantly inspired in diverse ways by plants in their poetry (Morton, 2010: 2). The extra-literary argument in this study is that Phyto-criticism which is the study of the science of plant ecology in relation with literature is relevant in Ushie's poetry.

The objective of this study, therefore, rests on the connection between humans and plants which the poet exploits to express himself in his poetry. Flora, Phyto, ecosystem or botanical imaginations in Joe Ushie's Poetry invokes, builds and expands previous considerations of the imagination in some of the earliest and most formative scholarship in ecocriticism. John Ryan (2018:7) affirms that ecocriticism signifies the ability of an author to mediate with the natural world in an evocative or persuasive manner, a quality that emerges between text and referent during the process of mediation. Ushie approaches the environment as one whose vegetative world is not simply a framing device, but it is also a presence in which human responsibility to plants imprints upon the ethical fabric of his poems. For him, his view of 'reality' encompasses the mind in relation to the phenomenal world. He also presents human beings as participants and not as the only observer of the natural process. Consciousness for him is a form of participation, and his sense of human being is integral, and not as a dominant part of the natural world. These traits which are peculiar to Ushie, align with ecological discourse. Generally, plants greatly inhabit, inundate, and influence Ushie's poetry.

## 2. Ushie's Poetry: Exploring the theme of Flora, Phyto, Vegetation, or Botany

The study of flora or vegetative content of Ushie's poems, is a plant-based form of criticism given the representation of vegetative life such as forests, trees, bushes, flowers, herbs, orchids, wildflowers, and garden plants in his poetry. The relationship between humans and the plant is expressed in "Orange tree":

At the peak of the yester-wet season,  
We encircled this orange tree,  
You, me, neighbours and passers-by,  
Off-loading her boughs, her bowls.

Some noons away now and  
Look at the tree, her ruffled  
Leaves rattled and falling  
Like alopecia-fired hair.

... Beneath, the sun-fired earth roasts  
My bare feet and the wilting grass  
Waits for the un-coming rain.

... Seasons march past. Sometimes  
The orange tree gulps water. Sometimes  
It gasps for a sip of dew,  
But its spirit ticks across the seasons. (*Eclipse in Rwanda*, 67)

The poet personifies the orange tree by giving it consciousness and the ability to perceive sensation which also embodies a certain degree of mental activity of vegetal life like “gasps”, “gulps” and “sip”. This indicates that plants possess human qualities. Over the years, human beings see plants as organisms that are unable to sense, feel or relate to their environment and are unresponsive to it as a result of their anthropocentric nature or human consideration. Ushie has however broken this misconception and proven it wrong and incorrect. In the lines above, the poet builds in plants the ability to perceive their state and their surroundings and are also capable of adjusting to their conditions depending on the environment which may be favorable or unfavorable. The argument made here is that plants, like humans, communicate and are responsive to their physical environment.

“The orange tree” eavesdrops on its neighboring “wilting grass” to acquire information about the “uncoming rain”. It communicates with microbes that allow it to forage more effectively and also with animals that facilitate mating and helps it to move its seeds to locations where it can “gulp water” and likely thrive and survive. Ushie portrays plants as sophisticated information-processing organ that have complex communication strategies. They can also sense and respond to environmental stimuli and play active role in their ability to survive and reproduce through ecological reactions in a conducive environment. This is a radical and an obtrusive human transformation which departs from the notion of perceiving plants as unresponsive and ready to be instrumentally appropriated. By providing a multifaceted understanding of plants informed by the latest developments in evolutionary ecology, the philosophy of biology, and ecocritical theory in the poem “The orange tree” promotes the freedom of imaginative thought necessary for new ecological awareness and more sustainable interactions with diverse life forms. In the expression, “we encircled this orange tree”, Ushie presents the orange tree as the most fundamental form of life, giving and enabling it with human essence and functions.

Human beings have focused attention on creatures like animals while trees are being neglected. The poet wants to redirect and focus man’s attention towards trees and consequently nature and the environment. Trees are hereby projected as life giving and sustaining. The orange tree has been a source of sustenance and nourishment to the poet and his native clime for decades. In the expression, “But its spirit ticks across the seasons”, captures plant’s ability to communicate and respond to time and tide in the

stream of existence. According to Gagliano (2017: 10), plants lack central nervous systems and so the mechanisms involved in sensing and communication in plants are quite different from those of animals. Hence, plants and animals have challenges with their communication system and so they evolve strategies of survival and functioning. Other things that endear the poet to the orange tree is its ability to flourish and even as “the rain is far gone”; and yet the tree is still “off-loading her boughs, her bowels”. The tree just like a mother, feeds and sustains her children, mankind. This is a symbol of motherhood who feeds and nurtures her children.

Similarly, using phyto-criticism as depicted in “The shrub”, the poet exhibits character trait of botanical beings and demonstrates how plants are rendered, evoked, mediated, or brought to life through the use of figurative expression:

But even here at this arena and around it,  
I can see some shooting green grass  
Waiting to be fertilized  
Or waiting for the right season (*Popular Stand and Other Poems*, 7)

With reference to the above, Tally and Battista (2016: 14) assert that one of the tasks of Phyto-criticism is “to identify the potentially negative construal of the vegetal world through the human proclivities for aestheticisation. This infers that plants are beautiful objects that make attractive picturesque scenery. In other words, the potency of Phyto-criticism derives not exclusively from its highlights of anti-ecological treatments of plants but also in its foregrounding of the heterogeneous way vegetal life has been integrated into literary invention. A critical view of the lines above reveals that ecological minded Ushie greatly cherishes and respects plants such that he carefully observes “some shooting green grass”.

Ushie’s obsessive plant-centered poems reveals the formative role of botanical beings in him from his youthful days. Again, from his expression of “shooting green grass”, the poet shows that the lively plant lives (shoots), implying that plants have life, live, express life, and enact their subjectivity in the world. Thus, the shooting of the grass provokes consciousness of the intrinsic faculties of vegetal life and lives to affect bodies and to be embodied. Against this background, Ryan (2018:16) observes that “botanical poetry becomes the material semiosis of vegetal being and vitalizes the reformulation of engrained ideas along with the botanical world”. The poet’s conception of plant-focused poetry aligns with the idea of the plant being part of the ecosystem. His poetry approximates the integrated systems of the

natural world. In examining the ways poets engage and mediate with botanical lives, Ushie offers a glimpse into the ontologies, epistemologies, and semi-spheres of the flora and, by extension, the environment and the ecosystem.

Ushie's poetry expresses the perception of plants having human attributes. His "Tropical neighbors" counters the premise that projects plants as lacking intelligence, consciousness, subjectivity that bear only a rudiment of the soul. Consequently, Gagliano (2017: 10) declares that plants sense a variety of cues that provide reliable information and communication. Against this background the poet reveals that plants detect light when receptor molecules absorb electromagnetic radiation; and absorb energy that causes changes in receptors that trigger responses in photosynthetically active tissues. Engaging the flora in "Tropical neighbor", the poet uses lyricism to present plants as sensitive, sacred and intelligence:

Each day the leaves of  
tropical forest open  
to receive the sun's loaves

Each day the leaves of  
tropical forest giants open  
to receive the sky's showers.

But beneath each canopy  
of each tropical forest tree,  
there are shriveled shrubs

gasping for the crumbs of rain  
from the trays above, and for  
peeping streaks of nature's rays.  
Yet, shrubs and trees rest on the same soil. (*Eclipse in Rwanda*, 58)

By employing personification in the expressions "receive the sun's loaves", "receive the sky's showers", "gasping for the crumbs of rain", and "peeping streaks of nature's rays", the poet integrates cosmological features in his poem got from his indigenous Bendi culture that perceives plants as spiritual and as participants in the creation narratives. Here, Ushie pursues poetry as a conversation with divinity in the community of beings of the ontology of Bendi's indigenous culture. Ushie is rooted in the traditional Bendi society, thus he is familiar with the mythology of the locality. The sacred ecology of plants at work in Ushie's poetry points to two dimensions of the vegetal soul. On one hand, there is the existing intrinsic plant soul, regardless of human ascriptions of ensoulment to the botanical world. On the other hand, there is the ability of plants to catalyze the sacred experiences of humans. This is

done to nourish our souls and provide living portals with divine experience in everyday consciousness. As presented in the poem, "Tropical neighbours", the botanical role of plants is to absorb energy from the rain to bring forth life through the dialectic as ensouled beings with proper capacities to their modes of existence which remains sensorial accessible to human subjects.

Ushie's floral and botanical eco-activism is dedicated to educating his readers to perceive and acknowledge the importance of plants and their unique human qualities and abilities, and also to recognize the ethics of human-plant relationships. To imagine the floral world around them in this way is the first step towards valuing plants and devising sustainable means of living with plants, rather than displacing and destroying them; which will eventually, mean destroying the environment which provides life, a place of abode, and economic resources for all. Ushie's inclination to floral life interweaves with the traditional English Nature poetry of poets such as Wordsworth and Keats. His passionate love for plants is akin to the love that one may express towards his god. Thus, he displays so much bitterness and pain on discovering that the cotton tree which he so cherished and preserved as a growing child in his village, has either been hewn down or destroyed by merchants and industrialists:

Remember that old silk cotton tree  
With whose wooing wool I had planned  
As a child, to turn a merchant, a millionaire. (*Popular Stand and Other Poems*, 32)

As an eco-poet, he sees plants as divine and mourns the loss of the cotton tree which grew along the Bendi hillside, a scene that captured his interest, desire, and love as a child. He visualizes his favorite cotton tree, an ephemeral spring orchid, a luscious path of rainforest moss, and then mourns its defilement and destruction. His lamentation is not just the death of the singular cotton plant, but of the entire ecosystem and the environment. By portraying a despoiled environment, the persona portrays characteristics of the current environmental degradation, a scenario where the fauna and the flora seem to be going toward extinction if nothing is done to halt the ongoing catastrophe.

It is also important to note that it is not simply the death of the cotton tree that the poet mourns. He grieves at the death of the whole scene; the ecosystem, vegetation, and even the area where the tree was formerly housed. This creates a deep melancholy in him. Bate (2000: 191) argues that there are two forms of death in plants. The first form is what he calls *biogenic* death. This has to do with

the material decay and demise of plants which reflects in the withering of leaves, rotting of roots, shedding of bark, and falling off of limbs as ecological occurrences central to the regeneration of the biosphere and the proliferation of obligate species. The second type refers to the anthropogenic death. This is the felling of trunks, poisoning of rhizomes, and the destruction of botanical enclaves due to acts of negligence, ignorance, or as a result of “ecocide” promulgated by human activities. Whether it is the biogenic or anthropogenic death, the poet laments about the demise of the entire vegetal death or the far-reaching cessation of plants which he admires and values greatly. He and plants are like the inseparable Siamese Twins. In the lines referred in the poem, the poet seems to feel sad and hopeless that the old economic tree which used to stand, with all it entailed, will never be available for him, the people, and the entire future generations in the community. The poet simply mourns the loss of the flora and looks back to when nature was truly beautiful and regrets its destruction which will affect the people and the environment.

As a child, he loved trees the same way a man would express love to a woman. Hence his use of the word “wooing”. The scene captured in the poem is just a dispatch from a place where beauty was lost. The natural flora is spoiled and some beautiful old memories have also been permanently taken away from him. The poem is a lamentation over the destruction because humans are ignorant of destruction they do. The possibility of plant ethics brings us closer to the consideration of our lives and deaths, including the embodiment of the emotional and spiritual effects on humans as plants cease to exist. This raises in the poet of what Costello (2003: 48) calls “botanical melancholia”. This is a form of emotional or existential distress caused by environmental degradation. It is a condition in which people who intimately identify with plants are either paralyzed or called to action by the anxiety, despair, and grief of witnessing the loss of an individual plant or the whole botanical elements of the community. Hence, Ryan (2018: 204) declares that botanical melancholia recognises the imbrications between biogenic and anthropogenic processes of a plant’s death.

Ushie’s feeling for the natural world and the eminence of plants and landscapes in his poetry reflect the poet’s rural upbringing on arable farmland in his village, Bendi. It is at least partly because of his childhood experience, having grown up in the village environment where all manner of plants; both domesticated and wild, ground-hugging and

skyward-reaching, factor into his world of botanical imagination, providing the vehicles for his poetic expression of dendrophilia and the act of loving trees. No doubt, there is a great sense of pastoral radicalism in the poet. An extreme pastoral life conspicuously factored into Ushie’s eco-poetic corpus. This combines acute sensory awareness of habitats and meticulous ecological knowledge of local flora. His poetic engagement with pastoral death reflects, on the one hand, the destruction of the native ecosystem, while on the other, the positive and negative environmental memories from his predominantly rural upbringing. Ushie grew up in the suburbs of Bendi where he nurtured a naturalist’s ability to observe the flora and the fauna of his rustic environment.

In “Roadside tree” the poet continues to mourn over the loss of plants. The worst injustice which can be perpetrated upon the natural vegetation, in Ushie’s view is the destruction of the flora. Such destruction robs Nature of its inherent power which lies precisely in its Otherness and renders it a paltry and diminished version of the human world. Ushie wants to see the world in its greenish vegetative milieu. Seeking an ideal greenish environment and embracing natural forces and elements as companions, are familiar traits in Ushie’s poetry. On seeing how the roadside tree dries up and withers, probably because of drought or environmental degradation, the poet mourns thus:

The fate  
of this roadside tree  
whose roots must have  
sunk their teeth into  
some hemlock, whose  
branches rain yellow  
leaves like a tropical  
downpour, whose under-  
growth is carpeted by  
the skeletons of the fall-  
en leaves – echoes loud the  
fate – of my clan whose  
human leaves falling from  
man’s feral rule (innocent green  
leaves whisked off by the  
brute iron brawns of the  
season’s horrifying hurricanes)  
whose mourners must hiss  
only in whispers their pain  
not to sip into the urgent  
ears of the throne which,  
like the teeth of the roots,  
has hooked us to canker. (*Eclipse in Rwanda*, 63)

The death imagery such as “yellow leaves” and “skeletons of the fallen leaves” tells the sad story of

environmental degradation which relates to human death caused by mundane life styles of the present society. The consequences of modernity and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century way of life, have not just destroyed the environment, it has also affected humanity negatively.

He expedites action and expends energy in most of his poetry to recall the sad state of the environment despoiled by human activities. In the poem, “Home-reel”, the poet in his characteristic botanical despondent and melancholic manner, expresses sympathy towards the tree on the roadside which is destroyed by drought as the poet shows that the branches have dried up and the tree emasculated and emaciated like a skeleton. This poor state of the tree is most likely to have been caused by negative forces of human activities as they are referred to as the “brute iron” which raises a deep concern in the poet.

If Ushie’s preoccupation with the flora is grafted on a chart or placed on a scale, his career line would show a high and steady captivation and progression with the natural vegetation. The first stanza of the poem “Home-reel” demonstrates a lyrical engagement which reveals that plants are locomotive, communicative, perceptive, sensitive, conscious, sentient, and intelligent. The poet also portrays that plants are built with souls rather than just captured as passive autonomous, aesthetic backdrops, or the mute foils of animalist tendencies. The poem gives plants animalistic tendencies with credence to speak and act for themselves:

At the last bend  
Named Libong Kekwoe-akai,  
the aquiline elephant grass  
welcomes you with its  
wind-powered waves.  
The primordial hilltop forests  
of silk cotton trees shaved into  
islands of groves by seasonal  
flames, mark your arrival. (*Eclipse in Rwanda*, 19)

Considering Ushie’s tendency to lyricize Libong Kekwoe-akai, as well as his sustained interest in Bendi and other indigenous environmental monument, the traditional Bendi dimension of his poetry requires botanical consideration. The expression “the aquiline elephant grass/welcomes you with its/ wind-powered waves”, captures the principle of the vegetal dialectics showing that plants affect and are affected; experience and are experienced; feel and are felt; sense and are sensed; remember and are remembered; imagine and are imagined, etc. The science of plant neurobiology increasingly affirms that vegetal life exhibits a

disposition towards intelligent behavior that enhances its evolutionary survival (Ryan, 2018: 37).

Ushie’s attribution to the plant as one who “welcomes you”, implies that he believes that human beings transact with the flora. Such appreciation of vegetal potentiality expands the ambit of human-plant interactions and relationships which goes beyond a narrow utilitarian paradigm of flora as foods, fibers, dyes, medicines, ornaments, aesthetics, or otherwise consumable things. Again, the poet presents the plant as one whose “flames, mark your arrival”. Here, Ushie believes that a plant is ensouled. He is of the views that a plant inherently bears a soul or spirit by the virtue of its nature and existence. The plant as an object signifies home, conduit, or stimulus of a spiritual experience, insight, or awakening of human beings. While visually evocative of African plant life, Ushie’s poetry also draws from a heightened sense of embodiment through tactile, olfactory, and gustatory feedback. The resulting immediacy of his sensory transactions with plants converges of an awareness of ecological exchange and spiritual consciousness of landscape that hybridizes a range of belief systems. To appreciate Ushie’s sacred ecology of plants is to recognize its basis in sensory experience and indigenous Bendi/African worldviews. In this poem, Ushie brings to the fore, botanical transformation to life, spurning the preconception of plants as insensate things through the twists and turns of lyrical language.

In the poem, “From hill to valley”, the regenerative processes of the plants and flowers unfold before the poet’s senses. The emergence of vegetal beings is rhythmic and processional, yet astonishing and all-enveloping. As new trees spring from the old and the colors of the natural world transform from dull to vibrant, one might be reminded of Aristotle and Aquinas’ speculation over the divisibility of the vegetative world. In Ushie’s view, a glimpse and grasp of the plants in the poem are both limitlessly accessible to ordinary perception. In the instance the poet begins to synthesize the sensory information acquired through a rupture in the forest, the plant community of ecologically threaded souls becomes alluring to the poet. The lines below exemplify this fact:

Once upon a hill  
trees stood as goliaths  
dressed in resplendent ferns.

There was the iroko’s  
expansive empire  
with a million shrubs as subjects

Next was Mahogany's domain  
standing defiance  
of marching seasons.

... There was the bougainvillea  
brandishing  
her multi-racial flowers.

...  
Once upon a hill  
The domineering silk cotton tree  
ranged high in the sky, a roaring  
mass in midst of midgets.

In the dry season,  
its milky clouds of wool  
sailed leisurely over the valleys  
on a sea of steel-muscled wind. (*Hill Songs*, 33)

This exemplifies the poet's passionate love for nature set against the background of the rustic flora. The poem is set in a hilly countryside, filled with many vegetative lives, particularly those that are known as ferns, iroko, mahogany, bougainvillea, shrubs, and cotton trees. Although the topography of the scene was "once upon a hill", the floral splendors are still enormous. The poet's attention is drawn to the alluring glamour of the plants. The ferns are adorned in their "resplendent" nature. The iroko in its bountiful disposition has covered its "expansive empire" with "a million shrubs". All the plants identified in the botanical ecology exhibit great forms of liveliness and vibrancy. The motif of liveliness is ensured by gazing at the plants re-echoed throughout the poem. Idealizing the place of one's youth, particularly when idyllic, as Ushie has done with the Bendi countryside, is understandable. However, the poet's ideal as can be seen in the poem is a world where the 'bougainvillea' is 'brandishing' and exuding its rich splendor in a way that even birds have it as their "colony" and "butterflies decorating shrubs".

The cotton plant is not left out in this splendid world of the flora as the poet makes it clear that the silk cotton tree is "domineering". There is a magnificent competitiveness in the world of the flora. It is the view of the poet that it is possible for many to achieve a spiritual union with nature. The extraordinary joy expressed by these plants is capable of reducing stress, anxiety and boredom inflicted by the times in the life of the observer or even the poet. The flora to the poet is an epicenter of reverie, reverence, rejuvenation, and enlightenment. The possibility for the poet to sense and perceive the body of plants in its splendor and plant life exists in dialogical exchange with the multitudinous bodies of

nature. This includes the iroko, mahogany, ferns, shrubs, bougainvillea, silk cotton, and other vegetal forms that co-inhabit in the hilly terrain. Plants are as always self-directed beings with discriminating internal sensory faculties and the potential for canal presence in the world. The use of the following verbs "dressed", "subjects", "brandishing" and "domineering" attest to this assertion. Ushie engages the somatic registers of vegetal life as part of his eco-poetics not just to figure out that plants as human analogs; for instance, have brains, lungs, skin, blood, and bones, although he regularly deploys anatomical rhetoric of plants. More compellingly is the fact that the poet resists a botanical imagination of disembodied, transcendent reverie by attending to the sensorial immediacies of plants in the actual spaces of inter-corporeal (relating between one's own body and that of the other) encounter. Understanding the plant-human inter-corporeality of Ushie's poems calls for awareness of the pastoral dimensions of his early life up bringing in the rustic Bendi community.

The poem "Hilltop Flowers" traces the source of Ushie poetic inspiration and narrates the intimate relationship between his botanical life and that of his poetic history. It is at the feet of the flowers that Ushie "do pick sonnets". During his solitary childhood Ushie's empathic disposition towards plants matured through the combination of walking, observing, reflecting, and composing: "All ways, I wear your presence/As an armor against anger/Against hunger, against death". In his narration of human-flora entanglements and affinities, Ushie eschews the hierarchical rendering of plants as disembodied automatons devoid of soul in comparison to their animal and human counterparts. On this note, Chamovitz in Ryan (2018: 70) points out that plants also have a highly sensitive inherent form of olfaction by sensing their own odours. For example, when their fruits get ripen, registering those of their neighbours threatened by grazing animals or voracious insects. Hence, plants are acted upon by humans, animals, and insects while, at the same time, they interact with their environment for the benefit of themselves and the ecosystems of which they are part of. Ushie's preponderance of writing botanical poems, presents the agentic plant body as an animate, self-governing yet permeable subject enmeshed within the ecological community of which it is part and parcel. His poetry uses plant tropes judiciously. Sharing an inwardness with plants and aligning with natural elements, Ushie presents himself as the offshoot of plants:

Your tension-dissolving rays  
Your wit-shooting stars of the forehead:

Tall thorn silk trees for  
My feeble words to climb

All ways, I wear your presence  
As an armor against anger  
Against hunger, against death

Ah, radiant hilltop flower  
At your feet do I pick sonnets  
Night and day, O winged Luck  
Spinning away my bliss like Penelope. (*Hill Songs*,  
68)

The above tribute shows the power and potentiality of the flower at hilltop to inspire, resuscitate and awaken poetic thoughts. The flower is endowed with beauty, strength, and has the ability to inspire. Its beauty is so alluring that it serves as the “lone star” in the night. As the beautiful flower grows on the hilltop, it attracts the poet’s attention and serves as a light giver that illuminate the whole place. Apart from its splendor, it also enriches the environment with fragrance; “your petals open and/fragrance clouds the clime”. Apart from the olfactory purpose of the flower, it also serves as a shade and protector against the direct scorching of the sun. To the poet, the flower is an instrument that gives joy especially when the poet is down and angry. Thus, the flower gives succor and serves as an “armor against anger”, gloom and dejection. The flower is also edible as it saves and shields the poet from hunger, and consequently, death. Most importantly, the flower is also his source of poetic inspirations; “At your feet do I pick sonnets/Night and day”. Thus he submits himself totally to the effect and influence of the flower and does not mind that at all that it “spin away from my bliss like Penelope”.

In ancient Greece, Penelope was the wife of Odysseus who remained faithful to her husband during his long absence at Troy. In “Hilltop flower” Ushie lyricizes vegetal embodiment as necessarily inter-corporeal; the plant’s presence emerges through contact and spirited exchange with humans, animals, insects, and other plants. The hilltop flower serves, not only as an inspiration to the poet but, it is also a symbol of his emotional wellbeing and comfort. Having submitted himself to the influence and control of the flower, the poet charges it, “shut not your luminous petals”. He wants his poetic outputs to be known across the globe. The fact that he is still being read across the globe after more than two decades of emergence as a young poet, is a fulfillment of that wish. Ushie’s “Hilltop flower” compels his readers to recognize his emotional attachment to the flora as an essential step towards valuing botanical nature and cherishing the vegetated

biosphere that graciously sustains life, despite humanity’s callous attitude towards nature. This, in the words of Ryan (2018: 93) it is termed “vegetal empathy”. Vegetal empathy breeds bio-empathic feeling *in* and *with* plants that conversely entails openness to being affected by plant’s gestures in response.

To Ushie, plants do not only serve as ornamental, spiritual, and means of sustenance. They are also medicinal and living entities. In stanza 9 of the poem, “From hill to valley”, the poet presents the healing powers of the plants thus:

All in those great seasons  
when forests were pharmacies  
and farmers the pharmacists. (*Hill songs*, 33)

Consistently, plants magnanimously supply humans with food, fiber, oxygen, and other essential ingredients and also provide medicinal substances that are vital to human health and wellbeing. Finch (2002: 81) captures these essences when he writes that the diverse herbal traditions of the world are often theorized in terms of ethnobiology, ethnobotany, and ethnopharmacology. He enunciates that vegetal life is an inimitable source of psychological rejuvenation and physical healing. Plants serve as healing balm, life-giver and sustainer to both human beings and animals. They therefore sacrifice their leaves, flowers, stems, roots for the well-being of both man and animals even to their own detriment. In contrast, the loss of an anatomical segment for most humans and animals is typically catastrophic because their bodies are not agreeable to being nibbled. Ushie is not just a vegetal oriented poet, he is also a botanical conscious poet. His botanical awareness foregrounds the topographical specificities of plants and the long-standing African cultural traditions, especially those involving medicine, nutrients, and spirituality of which the poet is embodied.

The sensitive nature of plants is also captured in “Tap root”. In this poem, the poet demonstrates how plants monitor and are sensitive to environmental changes, enacting the facility to both memorize and anticipate gradations in temperature, light, pressure, stress, and other ecological variables (Dreese, 2000: 137). In most of Ushie’s botanical poems, he makes explicit allusions to the science of plants. His poetry imaginatively mediates between vegetal beings and their ecological circumstances:

It prognosticates  
tap root of ebullient baobab,  
of steely iroko, of mahogany,  
into dynasties of earth

to grab grounds for fortress.

Still, a sting from earth's mystery  
wilt that immortal empire draining  
the fibrous-rooted shrub.

The empire falls, sometimes  
At the feet of standing shrubs. (*A Reign of Locust*,  
40)

From the above the reader can perceive that Ushie tends to metaphorize vegetal life. He sees vegetal nature as a symbol for the emotional state and ideational deliberations of human subjects. The opening lines of "Tap root", for instance, epitomize the distillation of botanical life into the symbolic language in which the poem bears its trace of real plants, their ecologies, and companion species. In the expression, "still, a sting from earth's mystery/wilt that immortal empire draining", the poet emphasizes that plants are not just remembered, memorialized, or metaphorized by humans. They also actively integrate information, make conscious decisions and predict future circumstances by taking previous experiences into account. This agrees with the assertions of Ryan (2018: 162) who affirms that vegetal being punctuate time and passage of things. In their bodily presence, "plants instantiate temporality through material-semiotic processes of bringing forth and dying back. These processes produce signifiers of temporal movement". In the expressions "prognosticates (forecast)" and "wilts", the poet establishes the fact that plant is an integral part of conception and time.

We appreciate Ushie's poetry through the prism of botanical hope. "The silk cotton tree" establishes vegetal life as an object or material expression of human hope and, on the other hand, as the principle that plants themselves possess, desire or aspire to. In "The silk cotton" plants give hope to the future generation and ensure the well-being of the bio-social communities:

Firm and rotund  
Stands the cotton tree –  
a crown of nourished leaves,  
a vassalage shrubs and ferns,  
a host to embassies of the avian race,  
to emissaries of squirrels and lizards.  
... In a twinkle of two seasons  
the silk tree lies prostrate,  
strangled by the filial embrace;  
its trunk's hollow host now  
to ants and deathwatch beetle;  
host now to every creeping thing. (*A Reign of Locust*  
65)

The lines above give a utilitarian role to the silk cotton tree. This is because it is exploited by humans, animals, and other motile creatures for food, medicine, fiber, and adornment. Ushie endears his readers to see the capability of the botanical domain as a positive influence to their bodies, minds, and spirits. Plant is presented by the poet as "a host to embassies of the avian race" and also as a host to "every creeping thing" which includes human beings. More than as mere resources, Ushie presents plants also as helpers. The selfless assistance perpetually granted by the botanical world to other beings expresses a yearning for familial exchange and hope for kinship with the non-plant. As a phytophile poet, Ushie is shaped and deeply inspired by the love of plants. Beyond their profoundly deep symbolic dimensions, he presents plants as vibrant, effective, and resonant presence in the world, just like poetry and imagination are to the poet. Inviting contemplation of the counterpart of the botanical hope dialectic, Ushie enables his readers to imagine plants as bearers of the forward-leaning consciousness necessary for hope. In the end, Ushie implores his readers to establish a cordial relationship with the botanical world by speaking to and listening to it and by attending sensitively to their specific dialogic modes.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper explored botanical consciousness of plants in Joe Ushie's poetry. Vegetal awareness and the knowledge of plants as explored in Ushie's poetry formed the thematic thrust of this paper. Through the study, Ushie is portrayed as a plant-centered and conscious poet. Many of Ushie's poems were analysed to show the poet's alignment and inclination to plants. He presents plants as humans inhabited with souls, and as gods, lovers, healers, inspirers, and as human companions. This study also revealed that the poet frowns and objects to the practice of ecocide, a mindless destruction of trees by hewing them which leads to ecological genocide and the annihilation of lives since plants are inbuilt with souls. In the end, as a phytophile poet, Ushie is shaped and deeply inspired by the love of plants and the environment. Beyond their profoundly deep symbolic dimensions, plants are always vibrant, affective, resonant, and present in the world and also in literary discourse.

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