

REPRESENTATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN THE NIGER DELTA: A STUDY OF TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE ACTIVIST*

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Abstract

Writers who are also members of the society, write from the very context within which they feel concerned or are directly affected by the prevailing social circumstances. No literary work exists in a vacuum. The essence of any composition is to bring to the fore issues that are of utmost significance to the society and the people concerned. The artistic vision of Tanure Ojaide in The Activist focuses on the hopelessness and helplessness associated with a sick and corrupt system where everyone is expected to work out his own "salvation" due to the insensitivity of those in government towards the plights of the people they govern. The seeming organized crimes by the deprived and less-privileged are only but a fight to reclaim their lost heritage and wealth. The glaring gross marginalization, injustices and underdevelopment in some parts of Nigeria and particularly in the Niger Delta form the focal point in the artistic innovation as portrayed in The Activist, which shows the need for a more extensive medium to articulate the perceptions of governance in Nigeria and also to demonstrate how and who should govern to right the wrongs in the society.

Key words: Deprivation, Governance, Marginalization, Injustice, Underdevelopment

Introduction

There has been avalanche of literary creation in recent years, all portraying the terrible and inhuman social and environmental neglect of the people of the Niger Delta region. Not only have they lost their land but the threat to their lives and other aquatic creatures arising from the aftermaths of oil spillage has also not been addressed. Over the years the activities and attitudes of oil companies towards the environment in the region, have become the concern of most literary scholars and environmentalists within and outside the region. It is on the premise of this concern that Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* in a great artistic manner, graphically reconstructs and captures the concrete conditions of the people in the region. The true position of the situation is a reflection of long term oppression and the deprivation of the people's only source of survival - the land.

The Activist captures and portrays the concrete experiences and suffering of the people. What goes on in the Niger Delta environment is most of the times concealed by the paid media

houses, both print and electronic, and the oil companies through the coalition of each successive Nigerian government, therefore the use of the literary media to expose the crime against man and nature in the region has become very imperative.

The economic and socio-political concerns of the downtrodden and the dispossessed stem from the neglect of Bell Oil, a multinational oil corporation in Nigeria, on the environment of the Niger Delta. Obviously, Bell Oil may not be too far from Shell which it represents here. The brutality visited on members of oil bearing community still tells of how much sacrifice they have to make for being blessed with oil underneath their soil. Bell Oil adopts the 'divide'and rule tactics which creates greater opportunity for those described as 'Member'. The 'member' is the comprador is called, works against the interest of his people in order to continue to service his unbridled avarice. This obviously points to the fact that our failure as a people is not as a result of our inability to work hard but due to misrepresentation by those

who should be at the forefront of the fight against underdevelopment and marginalization. But Ojaide's constant criticism of the activities of oil and gas companies in his literary works has helped in exposing what Paulo Freire calls "violation of human rights" (2). The violation of the people's human rights is in a systematic form such that it leaves a long term effects on the environment which can only be liken to the Hiroshima atomic bomb disaster in terms of the aftermaths of this massive oil exploration without a show of concern to how the environment is impacted. The short term effects include among other things, the breeding of local revolutionary, miscreants and deviants who vent their anger on the society. This is the beginning of revolution and rebellion."If we cannot live on our water, land and air, then we are finished . Those who take away our wealth must pay dearly for it", {*The Activist*, 82).

Ojaide's works on the environment is an in-depth discourse on environmental despoliation as it affects the indigenous peoples' general wellbeing, specifically women and children. His description of the Niger Delta environment calls for a close critical analysis of his representation of the Niger Delta eco-system. This paper, therefore, will focus on the effects of environmental pollution on the lives of women and children in Nigeria's Niger Delta and how the multinational corporation in conjunction with corrupt Nigeria government, democratic or military, exploits the indigenous peoples of their natural resources. It will also depict the gap the oil companies have created between the people and their closeness to nature in general.

The activist, as the protagonist, denies himself of the supposed good life in America in order to fight the course of injustice against his people. For example, multinational oil corporations present in Nigeria such as Shell and Chevron influence Nigeria's politics and economy even as their home Western countries gain from the companies' activities

abroad. These companies among others exploit the indigenous peoples of Nigeria's Niger Delta and destroy the ecosystem which is the mainstay and survival of the people of the region. And that is why Ojaide's works advocates for his people against the injustices meted on them by ongoing environmental disasters and exploitation. His works help to amplify not just the political and democratic voices of men and women. The environmental liberation in Nigeria may never be a thing of the past unless like the Activist and Pere, they stand against the oppressors who explore and exploit them. Unfortunately however, the external oppressors are embolden by the internal oppressors who benefit, economically and politically, from the suffering of the people. Environmental degradation (environmental pollution) began in 1958 and has posed unimaginable threats to the life of the people of the Nigerian Niger Delta. The oil companies have consistently polluted the water, air, and land without providing basic amenities like electricity, pipe borne water, roads, housing, and hospitals for the indigenous people. The historical and contemporary denial of these basic amenities for the people by the oil companies in collaboration with the Nigerian government is the backdrop for the environmental protest and activism that Ojaide constructs in his two significant works, *The Activist* (2005), and *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), analyzed in this project.

Theoretical Framework

The literary analysis of Tanure Ojaide's work incorporates environmental, religious, and socio-political concepts in interpreting the connections between a sustainable environment on one side and the insensitive and exploitative government and multinational corporations on the other. Ojaide argues for environmental revolution by the indigenous peoples, especially women, of Nigeria's Niger Delta to achieve a vision of environmental justice and a sustainable eco-system. In other words, Ojaide's work on the indigenous people

of Nigeria's Niger Delta offers an important means to deepen our understanding of postcolonial theory to move beyond outdated notions to colonialist power as seated in multinational corporations that transcend national origin. All that the people are asking for is ecological justice.

Ecological Injustice in the Activist

This term is used to explain Ojaide's vision and aspiration for his people in the Niger Delta to achieve a balance between being recompensed for the oil and investing into restoring the environment. In addition, eco-revolution is the process of environmental struggles of the indigenous people of the Niger Delta through protest and activism in order to restrain environmental degradation, restore already degraded areas, and have a balanced environmental policy that takes into consideration the needs and health of the people. *The Activist* and *The Tale of the Harmattan* have a recurring theme that deals with the subject of environmental protests, women and men activists, and their quests to reclaim the devastated land. Ojaide's novel and poetry collection focus on protesting against the multinational oil corporation is responsible for environmental despoliation in Nigeria over the past six decade. These multinational oil companies engage in reckless activities, paying attention only to their profits and not caring about the local communities and their environment. Ojaide uses his literary voice to illustrate environmental issues in the Niger Delta and show the negative impact of environmental and ecological degradation on women and children's health and the danger that Bell Oil, the name of the multinational oil company in his novel, *The Activist*, poses for the indigenous people.

Politics and Social Realism in *The Activist*

The Activist is a political novel with elements of social realism, such as protests and activism by the protagonist, who is also called the

Activist. Ojaide explores the life of an intellectual character, a professor returning home to the Niger Delta after twenty years. The Activist returns because he is tired of living in the United States, waiting for the American dream that is never realized. He also returns in order to work with his people to help them regain the pristine environment that the oil companies have dotted with oil wells and rustic pipelines with no regard or compensations for the people. The Activist, as a character in the novel, does not belong to any of the three major ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, namely Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Izon. Even though he speaks Urhobo and lives in Urhobo land, the writer does not say where the Activist comes from as he also has none of the native names of any of the three ethnic nationalities. Therefore, no single group in the region could lay claim to him. As an intellectual activist, he believes that he can use his knowledge gained from the Western world to reclaim the Niger Delta environment that has been damaged by the oil companies.

It is therefore obvious that dispossession is the precursor of violence in [the Niger Delta region. Onyema reminds us;

Poverty breeds prostitution, gas flaring breeds cancer and respiratory diseases, while lack of commensurate duty of care, by the Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies, breeds bunkering and further spillage, militancy, unemployment and youth crises, arm proliferation and hostage-taking of foreign and local oil workers. Determined, as it were, to protect her oil revenue at all cost, the Nigerian government uses unnecessary military force to quell pockets of restiveness and acts of pipeline vandalism by hungry and angry youths. (189).

Ojaide demonstrates the economic and political power of the West on the Nigerian government through the multinational oil companies. He describes the situation as a pitiable one whereby the indigenous peoples suffer from both internal colonialism by their own government, and external colonialism by the powerful imperial government of the West. In other words, in this postcolonial era in Nigeria, the Nigeria government is compelled most of the time to cooperate with the dictates of the imperial government to the detriment of the Niger Delta peoples' environmental comfort. The implication is that colonialism is not yet over. It has rather changed into neocolonialism in the form of multinational corporations ravaging not just the Delta peoples' health, land, water, plants, animals, and the entire religious and traditional lives, but also other nations of Africa where natural resources like oil and gas, gold, tin and other natural resources are found. In *The Activist*, women testify thus: the discomfort of being a woman increases with the discovery of exploitation of oil in the region (221). Such devastating discomfort includes the inability of women to conceive, delivery of malformed babies, early menopause by women before the age of forty, early menstrual cycle of girls before the age of ten, loss of virility at an early age, threat of oil fire to the environment, the continuous receding of the river goddesses, and the degeneration of the people's environmental spirituality, the newly scarred face of the Niger Delta, and the aborted nude protest and rape of the women by the Nigerian Navy men.

Ecological Mythology as a Belief System

In traditional African Nigeria society, the relationship between humans and nature has been in existence right from the creation of the world, something which African literary scholars have represented in their works. Environmental literary writing started in Nigeria in the 1990s and has been expanding since then. Sunny Awhefeada in "Degraded

Environment and Destabilized Women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* (2013) argues that the sudden active writing on environmental situation in Nigeria starting from the 1990s is a conscious response to the reckless activities of the industrialized nations on environmental despoliation. Awhefeada notes specifically that earlier Nigerian literary scholars and their works on the environment, such as J.P. Clark's "Streamside Exchange," Gabriel Okara's "Piano and Drums," and Wole Soyinka's "Idanre," portray significant elements of their people and the environment respectively. Ojaide's works, whether poetry or fiction, has always shown the elements of his Niger Delta people and its environment mostly portraying the extent of the devastating effects of environmental pollution on humans, plants, and animals. In other words, Ojaide, mostly in *The Activist*, compares the state of the environment before and after the multinational oil companies started prospecting for oil in the Nigeria's Delta region which different generations of literary writers from that region depicted and still depict in their works way before environmental literature was introduced into African literature. In the African tradition found in that continent and other parts of the world such as the Caribbean, but specifically among the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta region where Ojaide comes from, Mami Wata is a mythological female water goddess who brings wealth, fertility, bountiful harvest, and good fortune to her devotees. Even though the water goddess is not represented in the novel as an agent of environmental justice, the speaker describes the effects of environmental pollution on the goddess as being the same as the way it affects the indigenous women in the novel. Elements and images of nature such as creeks, evergreens, rivers/river goddesses, anemic trees, plants, and animals with various symbols show the importance of these elements not only to the Niger Delta but how the lives of the indigenous people revolve around their devastated environment. African

literary writers like Ojaide and others write to expose the degenerating situation and the extravagant and selfish corrupt African leaders in their literary works in order to expose not only the corrupt practices among African leaders— specifically in the Nigeria situation— but also the influence of Western world in the depletion of the country and continent. Ojaide recognizes the fact that African leaders are corrupt, but he also emphasizes how the West did not allow his people in the Niger Delta access to their own resources. In other words, in as much as Ojaide is against the bad leaders and horrific administration in Nigeria government, he also points out in *The Activist* how postcolonialism which grew out of colonialism, is partly responsible for the abject poverty among the indigenous peoples in his Delta region through a multinational oil corporation. Collaboration by corrupt leaders in Nigeria as well as other parts of the world with imperial Western governments may be either voluntary or enforced cooperation. Edward W. Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) argues that imperial government of the West do not care what the consequences of their actions are; they simply enforce cooperation on other countries, on developing nations of the world like Nigeria.

As a representation of sociopolitical experience, literature “recycles social experiences.” through “the prism of human imagination” and brings such experiences before us “into an aesthetic proposition” (Chidi Amuta 38-39). Thus, the Niger Delta crisis has created a resource trove for writers who are taking a stand on the ever widening demand for redress. In doing this, it is important for Niger Delta writers and their sympathizers to eschew the lachrymal approach and adopt the revolutionary fervour. To achieve this, writers should use the device of revolutionary realism in their presentation

The Return chronicles the true mentality of an average Nigerian towards the life in the

western world. The general belief that the streets of America is paved with gold led to the verbal attack and insults on the Activist in his homeland by his village elders. It can be seen as a pent up anger against the political leaders who rather than solve their problems, add to it. The policy of ‘national cake’ sharing, where everyone gets his own share when opportunity presents itself is basically the odd against our national development. The emergence of the ‘Area Boys’ militancy is seen as a revolutionary approach to the sharing of the national cake. The breaking of oil pipelines and the scooping of oil by the battle-ready militants is an indication that what was not given to them peacefully can still be taken by force. In fact, one of the recurring themes in most of Ojaide’s works is the concern of environmental pollution and lack of sustainability in the Nigerian Niger Delta, which some of the literary critics perceive as one of the most troubling issues affecting the region and its indigenous people. One of the subjects that interest critics of Ojaide’s environmental or nature works, be it poetry or fiction, is his critique of the corrupt practices of Nigeria’s political leaders, and his utmost support of the poor people in the country, peasant farmers/fish farmers in the Niger Delta (especially women), and his thematic examination of environmental revolution and sustainability. Environmental literature deals with the relationship between literature and the physical environment and the quest for revolution. The analysis of Ojaide’s literary work is situated in the socio-cultural context following the example of scholars such as Niyi Osundare, Uzoechi Nwagbara, Onookome Okome, Ogaga Okuyade, and Sunny Awhefeada who employ cultural criticism in their works. The Activist gained vast knowledge as a result of his educational career and long stay in the United States. The Niger Delta that the Activist used to know before his voluntary self-exile in the United States is different from the Delta he returns to see. The narrator compares the extent of the damage

done to the Niger Delta to a hurricane that has wreaked havoc beyond his wildest imagination.

Conclusion

Nigerian political novel to successfully and graphically reconstruct the conditions for the people of the Niger Delta. Nwagbara contextualizes his analysis of the novel in the political history of Nigeria, arguing that nothing has changed since independence and the formation of the country and comparing neocolonialism to modern day slavery. He notes that people's resources and economic power are still serving the imperialist government of the West through the multinational corporations which give back little or nothing as compensation for the exploitation and displacement of the people. Although Nwagbara emphasizes the importance of literature, particularly the genre of the novel, to create social change, his analysis of Ojaide's work focuses only on the male protagonist, who is identified with "political power and intellectual activism" (225). He never mentions the female characters as activists or political agents. Ojaide recognizes women's efforts towards social change, but only one scholar deals with the importance of women in the novel. Ojaruega analyzes both male and female characters, using the theory of eco-criticism, and analyzes how the women in the novel organize around the impact of the pollution on themselves, their children, and the men in their communities. She also covers how the novel focuses on the impact of poverty on women, with some women employed as cleaners, and others being expected to service foreign expatriates sexually. Ojaide recognizes the importance of women in the Niger Delta communities in the fight for environmental justice. In other words, the implication of Ojaide's writing shows that without women as environmental activists, there would be no environmental justice for Niger Delta environment and its indigenous peoples.

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