

Environmental Degradation and Attendant Consequences in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

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Abstract

This paper entitled “Environmental degradation is one of the foremost cankerworms plaguing the Niger-Delta region of our country”, Nigeria. The discovery of oil there has become a curse instead of a blessing to the people there. The activities of the oil companies there and with the trait support of the Federal Government has become a source of sorrow and nightmare to the inhabitants whose local environment has been destroyed. So in this study, "Environmental Degradation in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* " the researcher sets out to portray how the writer criticised the events in his society, and how the story serves as a reflection of the problems of the masses and the downtrodden in our society. The novelist made use of the literary medium to satirise the leaders in Africa and their styles of exercising reins of power which, instead of ameliorating the problems of the people and bringing in even development, only succeed in creating more suffering, pain and disappointment. Tanure Ojaide shows

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the humiliation, oppression, insensitivity, waste of lives, exploitation, cruelty of the ruling class, especially the military, on the citizens, as a result of greed and capitalist tendencies, which impoverish the citizens further. The researcher used both primary and secondary sources in the analysis of data. The findings showed that the citizens of the Niger-Delta experience betrayal, oppression, deprivation, and environmental degradation as a result of oil exploration. Unfortunately, their leaders do not care much about their problems as they are only interested in selfish acquisition of wealth to the detriment of the people.

Keywords: Corruption, Gullibility, Oppression, Bribery, Betrayal, Degradation, Environment

Introduction

The environment in which one finds oneself has a lot to do with one's writing. The main purpose of literature is to help us understand ourselves and the world around us. Literature begins when a writer imagines things and writes or says them. It provides us with hypothetical answers to the most important questions we have to ask: Why are we here? What is our relationship, our expectations or our obligations to the world around us? In that sense, the writer Tanure Ojaide through his novel *The Activist* has exposed some of the different modes through which literature is related to their environment in the Niger-Delta region.

The discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Olobiri on January 15, 1956 in the Niger Delta of Nigeria placed Nigeria among oil producing countries from 1958. The above vibrant economic discovery in Niger Delta necessitated a momentous means of revenue generation for the Nigerian Government. The activities of the Multi-nationals as well as the exploitative trends of economic consideration and environmental degradation have fuelled crisis, tensions and varied flow of responses as a result of exploitation and corruption that now dominated the literature of the Niger Deltas.

To the Niger Deltans, this war is also carried through and experienced in the literary lines as major writers interrogate and explicate these excruciating pains they feel in their mind. Niger Delta region has advocated social equality and environmental justice which had long eluded the region since the menace of oil extraction began to rampage the whole of Niger Delta environment. Writers from Niger Delta have joined in the collaborative effort of bringing about environmental justice against the collaborative despoliation of the environment perpetrated by the government and the oil companies. Chimeka Garrick's, Kaine Agary have joined the new crop of Niger Delta writers like Saro Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, Ben Binebai, Ibiwari

Ikiroko, Christine Watson among other writers.

The virtual destruction of Niger Delta and its attendant effects on the people have created an increasing feeling of insecurity, estrangement from their means of substance, hardship, unemployment, corruption and environmental degradation. Successive governments in Nigeria have exploited the resources of the region with reckless abandon. This exploitation and reckless abandon have stirred the creative impulses of creative ingenuity of writers within and outside the region. There is this tone of severity and submission occasioned by circumstances which now reflects in their literature. Nwahuanya posits that: "As the land bleed oil, so the people's tears in their abject poverty and real blood as they fair under the constant assault of government agents bent to silence their protests (16)."

The writers have through creative literature, increased their pressure on sensitive minds in their calls for a dispassionate reconsideration of the environmental and human rights issues which have repeatedly constituted their thematic focus. However, Niger Delta is a region bedeviled with ecological problems. The discovery of oil in the region has affected agriculture, fishing as well as the living conditions of the people, resulting to hardship for the people. Land, streams, creek etc

have been polluted. Apart from these ecological problems, the Niger Delta region lacks basic social amenities like portable drinking water, electricity, roads, hospitals, schools, job opportunities to enable the people earn their living and become self reliant yet the region is the proverbial goose the lays the golden egg that feeds the entire nation. It was against this backdrop of economic, social and political deprivation that Ken Saro Wiwa died for. Saro Wiwa views the exploitation of oil by Multi-nationals as anti-people exploitation. In an insightful interview, Saro Wiwa affirms that his people live in the middle of death. What Saro Wiwa advocates for is the right of the people to use the resources for their own development.

Saro Wiwa's fight for social justice and minority rights made him a man of the people. That he was able to mobilize and draw attention, locally and internationally, to the plight of his people marked him out as one of the greatest activists of our time. Ken Saro Wiwa's works tackle the issue of environmental degradation, exploitation, hardship and unemployment as a result of oil spillage and the placement of the Nigerian government that benefits solely from the proceeds of the petroleum.

It is necessary to add that though Niger Delta houses massive oil and gas

deposit, the majority of the people that live in the region wallow in abject poverty owing to administrative neglect, crumbling of infrastructure, and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, filth and squalor, and economic conflicts. With the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta, the region has been steeped in a whole of the environmental challenges and crisis engendered by oil exploration and resource extraction. The research portrays to solve the problems of Niger Delta and its environment treated in the selected literary works.

The theoretical framework for this study is eco-criticism. Eco-criticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, ecocriticism started developing in the 1990s. There is a close relation between ecocriticism and literature. It is an interdisciplinary study of Ecology and Literary Criticism which is unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature.

According to *Encyclopadia Britannica*;

The word ecocriticism is a semi neologism. *Eco* is short form of *ecology*, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. The relationship between man and nature is not just interdependent but also interrelated (1162).

By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. The term Ecocriticism has a broad domain and has been expressed through many literary genres. Ecocriticism is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature, culture and sometimes even supernatural elements in nature. It attempts to explore the expressions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. It is also a study of language through which literature is expressed.

To Echezona Ifejirika, there has been a close relationship between nature and literature.

This relationship has been reflected through writers and poets throughout different cultures across the world. A variety of novels, poems and other expressions of literature been depicted on the backdrop of issues concerning nature. Today, environments issues have become a matter of concern for many departments and disciplines of knowledge and development. It is an interesting study for a literary critic to study the texts of writers who have discussed the close relationship between man and nature (52).

Ecology and ecocriticism have become important terms in today's literary expressions. Many authors have expressed their concern for nature owing to the cupidity of human beings and growing population.

Ecocriticism as a rapidly expanding area of research covers wide range of texts and theories which study the relationship of man and nature. Environmental studies in literary texts through nature imagery, gender construct, feminism, man-woman relationship, tourism, culture etc have wider meanings than what is portrayed through their literal expressions.

This study, it is argued, cannot be performed without a keen understanding of the environmental crises of modern times and thus must inform personal and political actions; it is, in a sense, a form of activism. So using ecocritical approach, the study hopes to investigate the perception of the Nigerian natural environment with close textual attention to Tanure Ojaide's *Activist*.

Environmental Degradation in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

In fact, the discovery of oil made Nigeria rich and profligate, and even idle as to forgo her primary industry - agriculture. Even farming became a curse. But while the elite leaders bask in affluence, hunger and poverty become the lot of the underprivileged and the unemployed. Furthermore, subsequent military interventions deny the nation the growth of democracy and buried the state in the rubble heaps of dictatorship, corruption, indebtedness and generally moral decay in public and private life. This downward trend has resulted in squandering of wealth, and diminished the promise of becoming Africa's and Black People's leader. ¹

Uzoechi Nwagbara states in *Political Power and Intellectual Activism* in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*: "the novel reconstructs the plight of the

downtrodden and marginalized in the-Niger-Delta and Nigeria by extension. . . It refracts the destruction done to the Nigerian environment by the multinationals in partnership with the political class (4)."

So, in *The Activist*, the storyline dwells on environmental degradation. The environment has been greatly abused as a result of oil exploration. The novel demonstrates how wealth creates poverty in Niger-Delta communities. The discovery of oil in the Niger-Delta region impoverishes their environs and deprives the citizens their means of livelihood. The people have been indiscriminately exposed to untold hardship and oppression by successive military administrations. The continuous degradation of its natural environment and the fact that non-indigenes take up the good jobs infuriate them. Thus, the novelist writes:

The people of other states enjoy the oil prosperity at the expense of the hard-toiling ⁱ farmers and fishermen and women whose lands, water and air were polluted by oil slicks, blowouts and permanent flares that made hell a daily experience of the Niger-Delta, and . . . the government and oil corporations brought in people from other states to fill jobs in the industry that was destroying not only their

environment but also sources of their livelihood (58).

As the narrator states, the Niger-Delta environment is greatly impoverished as a result of oil exploration. The rate of food production has drastically reduced; marine life and farm crops are destroyed and fishing becomes a past event. Oil spillage on their farmlands makes farming unproductive. Farmers receive no compensation for their losses. Continuous gas flares in the vicinity and the high pressure oil-pipelines are not conducive to human life. Hence, the novelist writes: "The air used to be cool because of constant rain and the luxuriant forest, but, oil slicks, blowout and gas flares had destroyed that life. Even the rain that falls'was soot black that no more did anybody drink (63)."

Medically, the people are not safe inhaling polluted air and drinking contaminated water, in the novel, several complaints of health hazards on both the young and old are made. The oil companies dump toxic wastes into the rivers and creeks, thereby poisoning the water and aquatic lives. Gas flares and fumes from industrial sites give rise to very high temperatures that affect human health. Mrs. Timi Taylor and other women relate the negative changes that have been plaguing their health and their reproductive system. Umutor complains that in the Oginib'o area, "women are finding it difficult to conceive (239)." Another woman

says that "our pregnant women are delivering so many malformed babies." "Young husbands lose their manhood at a very early age" and "young girls of ten years are now menstruating. . . . How can these ten-year-old girls cope? (240)." They assert that the discomfort of being a woman has definitely increased with the discovery of oil in their land. Their situation is better described as "from oil boom to oil doom (240)."

They complain that they can no longer grow healing plants because of oil spillage and to worsen their predicament, the government does not deem it fit to provide them with well-equipped hospitals or compensate them in anyway. Furthermore, the environment is now a menace to their safety. Most times, the people experience oil leakages that result in massive fire outbreaks, which usually claim lives, houses, plants and farm lands. The victims whose houses are destroyed are not compensated for such losses. Ojaide writes:

There was this outburst of crude oil that easily caught fire; the village was burnt to the ground. The oil companies did not even send a fire department team to put out the fire. They knew that there was a blowout and the fire vehicles were stationed at a location less than twenty miles away. Rather, they sat in their offices and

issued a statement that the native population was sabotaging their pipelines (193).

Even as the narrator states, no effort is made to cater for the refugee population of Roko village. Here, the homeless victims have no answer to the evil perpetrated against them. The Activist, Pere and his area boys, and the student union of the university see it as an opportunity to demonstrate. When the oil company hears of the proposed protest through their agents, they decide to send Bell Oil's community development officer to pacify the student groups. Professor Tabore Ede comes to campus with the task of pacifying the restive students. As the narrator states:

He dressed flamboyantly in a flowing robe made of expensive brocade. That robe would cost more than one student's annual school fees; its embroidery alone would take care of a senior student's recommended books for the entire year. He came in chauffeur-driven; ensconced at the right back seat (193).

Such is the display of affluence by a fellow Niger-Deltan, at the expense of suffering and humiliated people. The professor tries to bribe the students with drinks and false promises from the oil companies but he

fails. His false accusations on the people make the students mete out jungle justice on him by burning him to death. As the narrator states, when asked why the displaced villagers have not been taken care of, he guffs, saying:

The villagers set their village on fire because they wanted to extort money from Bell Oil Company. People have become lazy and want an easy way to make money. None of those villagers has a farm they used to, none of them carries on fishing in waters proverbially rich with all kinds of fresh and salt water fish. The villagers only sit at home drinking illicit gin and playing both draft and eko games (194).

His answers infuriate the students who see him as a saboteur; hence they burnt him to death. Politically, the novel examines the human condition in the face of tyranny, oppression, oppression and military dictatorship. The age of independence witnessed the emergence of social class contradictions, development and disappointment to many. The people are immensely oppressed and any effort they make to protect themselves fails. Corruption is at the highest peak because most educated elites of Niger-Delta, like the incinerated Professor Tabore

Ede, receive huge amounts of money from the oil companies to shut their ears from the cries of the helpless victims who suffer untold hardships from Bell Oil, and O & G Company.

Even the titled men of the region are not left out, except Chief Tobi Ishaka who strongly refuses to partake in sharing the bribe money given to them by the oil companies. A few individuals enjoy wealth at the expense of many who do not have the means of livelihood and shelter, since the farms and rivers have been destroyed. Initially, the discovery of oil in their lands brought joy to the people, but it later becomes a curse, a source of suffering, exploitation, deprivation and poverty. As the novelist states:

Tobi Ishaka had rejoiced when oil was first discovered in his farmland and family land. He expected a transformation of rural place to a city. He had been a Lagos and seen its beauty in the skyscrapers and roads and had thought that the oil found in the area would be partly used to bring social amenities. The area needed maternity homes, hospitals, post offices and well-equipped schools (176), But unfortunately, all these expectations are unrealized as the national profits from

oil are used to develop other places. Chief Tobi Ishaka even complains that "he saw outsiders occupying all the key positions in the oil companies while most of their children remained unemployed". Chief Ishaka laments that "he saw no simple solution to the community's problems" (176).

He sums up their plight thus:

In ganging up against the minority groups from whose area ninety-five percent of the nation's revenue are derived, once the majority groups ganged together, they possessed the power of a monster. Add their power to that of the military government and the multinational companies, and one could imagine the obscene force that the minority Niger-Delta had to contend with. These big powers were not invincible, but it would take so much effort to defeat them (177).

Such is the nature of the oppression and deprivation the people suffer in their fatherland. The worst is that their leaders are part of the perpetrators of the inhuman treatment. Sadly also, the federal military government aids the exploitation and oppression of the people through

decrees. As the narrator says:

A military decree is an instrument of coercion, exploitation and oppression and so is invalid whatever Land Use Decree was promulgated to seize lands from its owners ... what was done by force, by its very nature, was illegal and unjust. The oil companies and the military junta did not consult the owners of the land over their oil-prospecting activities. As one has to fight fire with fire, so should the illegality of the outsiders be resisted with whatever means by the insiders (152).

So what the people wanted was good and honest leadership. But from the military governments to the present dispensation, it is massive stealing, massive looting, corruption, destruction and bastardisation of existing manpower and infrastructure. In fact, in considering human and natural resources, Nigeria is a potentially very rich country. If the resources, the government and the people are well organised to harness the numerous veritable mineral and human resources of this country, the talk about poverty will not be an issue at all. The military government uses every possible means to silence complaints and opposition; hence the people's revolt to grab their own fair share of their God-given

wealth.

The power and importance of women as political and social forces in their local communities is another pivotal matter the novelist brings to bear in this novel. As the narrator says, the women gathered to help find solutions to the prevailing problems in their environment since the efforts of the men in the past had not yielded much positive results:

Pipes had been laid across groves, villages and towns, intruding into the private spaces of animal, plant and human populations. All the storks; kingfishers, weaverbirds, sunbirds, and many others had disappeared. The herbs and flower were almost gone and only the old remembered them by their names. Simple herbs that cured many ailments had disappeared with the coming of oil (242).

Whatever negatively affects animals, plants and birds of the air must be catastrophic to human beings. As a result, the human population is suffering from ill health. The disappearance of the sources of traditional medicinal herbs is a case in point. New sicknesses have invaded the environment without known cures. So-the women discuss

how to make their environment safe from pollution and attract real development. To actualize their dreams, they form an association called "Women of the Delta 'Forum (WODEFOR), with Timi Taylor as its President and Ebi Emasheyi as the Secretary (213)." The women prime themselves for action. As the novelist notes:

They would look for ways to talk to the oil companies to persuade them arrest the deteriorating environmental situation in the Niger-Delta. They would address the military government about their concerns (243). But the problem is how to get across to the government since "the soldiers in government did not respect women because they saw women as only sex mates (244).

However, the women are determined to effect change by all means. As they reason; if the talks with the oil companies and the military government failed, they would look for unconventional ways to compel them to act. They would start with persuasion, but if that failed, they would have to confront those ruining them and their environment with the power they possessed.

With such resolution, the women were determined to Fight. To them,

Bell Oil Company and the federal military government might be mountains, they know from precedents in their customs how to defeat them. As Mrs. Taylor says, "Let the oil bosses and the military chiefs not continue to take women for granted. They will be surprised at the power that women could wield when driven to the wall (244)."

Not long after the formation of the women association, the bubble burst. The women association in conjunction with the area boys led by Pere, like-minded lecturers and students of the Niger-Delta State University, come up with "the idea of sending a delegation to the United Nations and mobilizing opinion in North America and Europe to curtail the excesses of the oil companies (253)." They take photographs and other aspects of evidence of the damage to their environment. Armed with all these exhibits, "the Niger-Delta delegation which comprises three men and two women: Chief Tobi Ishaka; Mr Omagbemi Mukoro; Dr Biriye Oтите, a senior lecturer with specialisation in ecology; Mrs. Timi Taylor and Ebi Emasheyi (254)" are prevented from travelling at the airport. As the airport Chief of Security tells them, "You people cannot travel. I have orders from above to seize your passports. Idris, let go the doctor and let them go back home (257)."

When the members of the delegation returned from Lagos and reported

how they were stopped from flying out, the people were incensed and wanted to take matters into their own hands. Worst still, within days of the aborted overseas trip of the oil community's delegation, federal secret agents descended on the Niger-Delta State for a major security operation. As the novelist writes, "they raided offices and homes of the delegates and confiscated documents, coloured pictures and maps, slides and video-cassettes taken of sites of oil pollution (257)."

When the delegates reported their sad experiences to the community, the search and seizure of related and unrelated documents from offices and homes, there was an outrage. The people felt bitter that the government could stoop so low to achieve its aims of keeping the outside world ignorant of its collaboration with Bell Oil and the other oil companies. More so, an oil blowout at Ekakpamre, exacerbated by a pipe leakage and fuelled by gas flares throws the people into an unprecedented state of anxiety. As the narrator describes the situation; "the blaze was savage. At first children ran out to watch it but soon their parents ran to physically drag them from endangering their lives. With strong winds blowing, anybody nearby could be engulfed by the flames (261)."

As usual, Bell Oil knows very well that there was a blowout but does not

send its fire-fighting team to put out the fire. The Uto River is literally burning as every green plant, dry leaf and shrub that stands by the river all become combustible materials.'According to the narrator:

The poisonous methane gas fumes engulfed plants, wildlife and humans around for days. . . . The residents' frantic efforts to douse the blaze with sand and water was of no effect. . . . Thus, they found themselves helpless before this monstrous fire. There were many premature births because some pregnant women went into sudden labour. Babies coughed relentlessly. The old wheezed. Eyes itched and those already with poor eyesight had their problems worsened by the fire and smoke. No one was safe from the fuming blaze (261).

This sad situation provides ample opportunity for the students led by Omagbemi Mulcoro to go on protest against the federal military government that has failed to protect its "citizens against natural and man-made disasters (261)." It is a decisive moment and Omagbemi as the Student Union President mobilizes his fellow students for a massive protest against the multinationals. According to Ojaide; "the students' protest would be remembered not for putting out the fire consuming the

Uto River and also threatening the lives of Ekakpamre people but for its brutal suppression by mobile policemen that Bell Oil Company asked to secure their installations (262)."

The mobile policemen are paid huge sums of money by the oppressive multinationals to suppress any form of protest or demonstration. For that they descend heavily on the unarmed student protesters. According to Ojaide:

The students carried green leaves and branches to signify the peaceful nature of their protest. They wore white headbands, also a sign of peace. They wanted to draw attention to the plight of the Ekakpamre community so that either the oil company or the military government could do something immediately . . . but within the first five minutes of the peaceful march starting from the riverside area most affected by the blowout, bursts of gunfire from soldiers that had earlier that day at half light dug trenches and taken positions in them broke out (263). . .

The Federal Military Government is thrown into an unprecedented panic when they hear of the planned protest. The government promptly

gives orders to troops stationed in the communities within to stop the protest with immediate effect. So many are shot dead and many others sustain various forms of injuries. Ojaide states: "The war god of the military and the oil companies received sufficient sacrifice of human blood! The corpses of the dead and many wounded who could not run but fell down littered the landscape. Blood splattered on the soil and on leaves. The carnage was there in the sun (263)."

Yet, the soldiers and the police deny shooting anybody. They rather claim that they only shot in the air in self-defense. While there is mourning for the dead everywhere in the land, the military government swiftly issues a statement commending the police and the army for a job well-done.

"Even the national media; radio, television and print, were all quiet (264)." Because the journalists are also under the company's payroll from the secret fund earmarked for the oil-producing communities.

The women as a force wore black clothes and left their hair unmade. The women leaders held a meeting and agreed to use their naked strength against the tyrants. They are to seize a flow station and an oil-loading facility and then strip naked there in protest. According to their plans, "only women who had reached their menopause would take part. This

was in keeping with traditional practice of cursing the oppressor (265)," At the appointed time of the nude protest, says *The Activist*:

The women were set for action. The Nigerian workers who had heard of the planned women's nude protest either did not show up for work or slipped out before the women arrived.-They were not ready to commit a taboo seeing women old enough to be their mothers or grandmothers naked! The gatemen were so embarrassed that they did not resist when they saw a stream of elderly women pouring in from boats. From the stare in the women's eyes, the gatemen knew the women meant business and so ran away. The women took over both facilities without any resistance from the guards (271).

The women too are affected, this can be seen in their nude protest against the Bell Oil Company because they believe that things will not work out well for the companies officials if they protest nude, these are all done in the bid to draw the government attention to the problems of the area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study tries to emphasise the height of environmental

devastation, denigration, brutalization and exploitation meted against the Niger natives whom were massively neglected and abandoned by the Federal government and the oil expatriates in Nigeria. The study succeeded in using Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* to X-ray and expose the havoc, perils, lynching as a result of lugubrious issues in their environment such as oil spillage, gas flares, fire explosion which rendered the land into hunger and poverty and had affected the irate youths of Niger Delta.

The result of these, brought about corruption in Niger Delta such as Bribery, oil bunkering, collection of ransoms also resulted in kidnapping which the federal government felt out of neglect, that it was the natives that brought all the problems upon themselves as they were tagged "rebels" by the government up till today. So, the Eco writers of this work or problem used their works to depict and to X-ray their inner feelings by representing the voice of their common people using fictitious characters who had suffered terribly at perplexed and brutal situations meted on them by the Nigerian government and her soldiers and also, they had tried in their works to bring the consciousness of the people towards the inhuman conditions that Niger Delta natives had experienced in their land, even up till today

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