

ALÓRE

VOL.28, 2019



**ILORIN JOURNAL
OF THE
HUMANITIES**

ISSN: 0794-4551

ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE AND REVOLUTIONARY DIALECTICS IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE ACTIVIST*

Abdullahi Kadir Ayinde
Department of English
University of Ilorin, Ilorin
kadiraabdul@yahoo.com
+234 7037950071

Abstract

Since literature cannot be divorced from pressing social events of society, contemporary African novels, in recent times, have largely explored environmental discourse as a dominant thematic preoccupation. Most of the likely eco-critically based novels explore human-environmental relations, and thus reflect how literature mediates in canvassing eco-friendly society. This trend is nowhere more visible in Nigeria than in literary expressions of writers from the Niger-Delta region. Ojaide is a renowned African novelist whose idea is radical and militant, especially in connection with contemporary environmental discourse in Nigerian fiction. Thus, this essay studies environmental praxis, and the dimension of social vision in his *The Activist*. Relying on sociological criticism, the argument locates the agitation and violence in the Niger Delta in the socio-economic deprivation and poverty arising from environmental pollution and degradation. The objective of the study is to show, through the novel, how the intellectuals who champion the course of liberating the people from the shackles of poverty and environmental related crises, are grossly clueless when it comes to addressing the various challenges bedeviling their society. The study thus brings to fore the apparent challenges inhibiting the social vision that Ojaide wields as a weapon to promote social justice and change.

Keywords: Activist, Environmental literature, Revolutionary dialectics, Character.

Introduction

The Niger Delta is oil-rich, yet (is one of the most marginalised and least developed regions in Nigeria. Quite a number literary texts such as, Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*, Ajibade's *Tears of the Niger Delta*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Bina Nengi Ilagha's *Condolence*, J.P. Clark's *All for Oil*, Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* and others too numerous to mention have revealed that the region has a large number of inhabitants who live in abject poverty in spite of abundant oil mineral deposit. The unending reactions to poverty-induced environmental hazard occasioned the kind of perennial violence that keeps recurring and overheating the polity. Unfortunately, many people are oblivious of the fact that the problem in the region is ultimately compounded by those who claim to champion the cause of emancipating the people. Through *The Activist*, Ojaide makes the compelling confession that the Niger-Delta intellectuals are grossly clueless, when it comes to addressing the various challenges bedeviling their people.

Through a study of environmental praxis and social vision in the novel, this paper takes a look at the dominant challenges confronting the realisation of environmental protection and sustainability in the Niger Delta, as reflected in *The Activist*. The import of the study is to demonstrate how the Nigerian intellectuals seek to wipe their share of the mess that constitutes the tragedy of oil exploration in the affected region. The paper is, therefore, a valuable addition to the study of the environmentally-induced violence in Nigerian fictions. Apart from a few selected critical reviews of Ojaide's *The Activist*, apparently no scholarly essay of this type has

focused extensively on how the intellectual class in the Niger-Delta has betrayed the common masses in the campaign against ecological exploitation and devastation of the environment. A few of the existing studies are right in their reading of the novel from similar perspective; however, their criticisms glaringly ignore the apparent flaw of the protagonist as an agent of social change. Even though Ikheloa's (2007) criticism flows along the same tide with this study, neither him nor any other critic examines the argument as sociologically attempted in this essay.

Theoretical Issues

Ojaide is a writer well known for his militant social vision about environmental discourse in the Niger-Delta. His radical view and social ideology is aesthetically defined by a sociological perspective of society and art. Sociological criticism was introduced by Burke, a twentieth century literary and critical theorist, who posits that literatures "are strategic naming of situations that allow the reader to better understand and gain a sort of control over societal happenings through the work of art". Sociological criticism, thus, examines the social contexts of literature, and analyses novel from the entire structure of society. The theory seeks to understand literature in its larger social context. It studies a work of art from the cultural, economic and political contexts.

Sociological criticism, according to Escarpit (1971) has been part of a growing interest in the broad cultural stock of society in all its levels. It is a criticism that helps the critic to establish that literature is a product of social formation and subject to social change. The theory promotes the study of the entire environment of a literary creation. It is not only an exploration of literary content, but also of its context. The major tenet of sociological criticism, according to Escarpit (p.4) is that "it is an intensive, suggestive and coherent study of a particular complex literary action in society". Vladimir cited in Escarpit's *Sociology of Literature* (1971, p4) declares that

Literature must be considered in its inseparable relation to social life, the background of those historical and social factors which influence the writer, this has always been the guiding principles behind Soviet's literary research... Literature is a social phenomenon, the perception of reality through creative images.

Literary work explores issues as they affect society in which writer lives. There is no art, according to Adolf Sanchez cited in Ampah (2008. p.1) that has not been unaffected by social influences, and no art has failed in turn to influence society. This conceptualisation underscores the symbiotic relationship between arts and society. As an extrinsically motivated criticism, the sociological theory presupposes that the sociocultural interpretation of text is a valid mode of critical analysis. Thus, its analysis goes beyond the content; it takes into account "an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature" (Habib, 2011, p.206). Critics believe that a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilisation, and its boundaries cannot be drawn.

A more contemporary statement on the sociological approach to literary criticism emanates from Rene Wellek and Austin Warren as cited in Dobied (2012, p.17). In their *Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren identify five areas that are of interest to the social critic of literature. They note the importance of the writer's environment. They also call attention to the society that is being depicted in the text. The duo equally focuses on the society that the work entered, that is, the audience for which the text was intended. What kind of impacts did it have on the readers? How was it critically received?

For several reasons, sociological criticism has waned in vogue over recent years. One of such apparent reasons is that several schools of thoughts like Marxism, New Historicism, Cultural materialism, Historical criticism, Reader-Response Theory, Reflection Theory and host of others have recently adapted and adopted sociological perspective in a way that is more specific and powerful. Nevertheless, many critics still find social history to be helpful means of extending the understanding of a story. The Activist belongs to the tradition of Nigerian literature that aims to resolve the lingering economic and political confusions. The work is produced to mirror happenings that are inimical to the wellbeing of individual members of the society.

Ojaide uses characterisation as a metaphor to drive authorial quest for social change. He has been courageous to challenge the political system in Nigeria and more especially the tragedy of oil exploration and its attendant environmental degradation, corruption and poverty. Obiechina (2001) cited in Obafemi (2008,p.48) asserts that

Nigerian writers should have a special allegiance to the down trodden in the society. To the socially handicapped; to the women, the children, the unemployed, all those who are not able to fight their own battle, the writer should put on his armour and charge into battle in the defence of the defenceless. It is for this reason that writers in Nigeria today have taken position against the oppression of the people, all forms of brutalities and unwarranted violence against the masses.

The Dimension of Social Vision in The Activist

The primary goal of most postcolonial African novels is to ignite genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political reformation. The Activist is one of the contemporary Nigerian novels that reflect the spate of environmentally-induced violence in the Niger-Delta. It canvasses a strong revolutionary disposition to the menace of injustice, corruption, exploitation and inequality in the social class of the Nigerian society. The story presents a protagonist simply named the Activist who returns from his sojourn overseas to champion the course of liberating the less privileged masses from the perennial crisis of environmental pollution, human right abuses & social tension. Ironically, the Activist ends up corruptly enriching himself through illegal business of bunkering. What this attitude points to! is that the intellectual class in the Niger-Delta has betrayed the common masses in the campaign against ecological exploitation and devastation of the environment. In this way, the Niger- Delta intellectuals have contributed in deepening the poverty which heightens agitation among the youths. The plot structure weaves strand of stories and presents characters such as Ebi, Pere, Tob, Shaka, Dr. Mukoro, Omogbemi Dennis who support the Activist in his bid to protest the ills perpetuated the government in power and multi-national Bell Oil Company.

The novel represents a serious indictment of the oil companies that sponsor military coup in Nigeria, for the selfish benefit of sustaining the exploitative exploration. The story depicts a scenario in which Bell Multi-national Oil Company supports the military dictators that brutally repress the populace, in spite of pollution occasioned by oil spillage and gas flaring that persistently constitutes health hazard and destruction of the eco system. For this reason, there has been a continuous agitation and civil unrest in the Niger Delta between the government and the teeming youths. Since the discovery of oil in 1956, the environment where exploration is taking place has witnessed despoliation. The means of livelihood of the inhabitants have virtually been destroyed. This condition has also led to many violent protests, kidnappings and killings. Thus, the story is woven around the main character whose outward ambition appears to be patriotic.

He declares his intention to change the misfortune of his impoverished society. He rises against the intimidation of the oil company and the government in power. Ojaide presents the protagonist like a revolutionary character, who sets to fight a corrupt and exploitative system, but his attitude definitely excites debate on his status as a true patriot, especially when placed side by side with actual revolutionary leaders like The Dentist in Soyinka's *Season of Anoniy*, Kimanthi in Wa Thiong'o and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimanthi* or Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, who risk everything to fight an evil government.

The characters who surround the Activist never really believe he comes to stay for good in the region. When the Activist returns, he meets Fbi, who later becomes his wife and learns the traditional norms he had forgotten. He constitutes a gang (Egba Boys) who starts to kidnap the white men of Bell Oil Company, the government officers and the rich to demand a ransom. This act is a form of criminality unbecoming of an intellectual. The story parades different characters that terrorize the society. The Activist in company of thugs jumps into bunkering. This economic sabotage is a clear indication of how the intellectuals seek to have their share of the mess that is euphemistically called Nigerian factor. Ikheloa (2007, p.2) declares that

The Activist decides to partner with local thugs to engage in oil bunkering, and somehow persuades himself that this is for the good of the long suffering people of the Niger Delta! When our intellectuals look in the mirror they see what we don't see and the result is a self-serving narcissist hagiography like the Activist.

The Activist who parades huge academic credentials with substantial international exposure desecrates the core value of intellectualism. The portrayal of the Activist as the revolutionary type reveals a thought-provoking insight into the kind of revolutionary leader that the Niger-Delta people desire, or are being encouraged to desire or invariably expect. The attitude of the characters as portrayed in the novel is an inarticulate rendering of a heart-wrenching phenomenon of how Nigerian intellectuals have failed in their quest to effect a change in the life of their impoverished people. A scene in the novel indicates the complicity for bunkering between The Activist and thugs. "Pere made more inquiries about bunkering and learnt how multifaceted it was... Diverting the tankers taking fuel from the refinery to a road side to sell drums of fuel to hustlers was bunkering". (p.152)

The Activist becomes excessively rich through bunkering. He becomes the proprietor of an award winning newspaper. He enlists one of his children as a member of the Bell Oil Company. He becomes one of the exploiters, who profits illegally from the misfortune he poises to challenge and redress. One then needs to ask where lays the patriotism proclaimed by the hero in the novel. In the opinion of Ahkuemokhan in *The Revolutionary Character in the African Novel* (2014):

Altruism is the acid test of the sterling man of stature. It demarcates the revolutionary character from the revolutionary imposter, even though the undiscerning may not know the difference. Without altruism, the rebel is a fraud. If he manifests all other traits-zeal, activism and radicalism- and lacks this emphatic one, then he is not the man for the people. (p,143)

Bunkering is an illegal business that becomes the Nigeria's greatest undoing in respect of her earning from oil in the recent time. This illicit business remains one of the causes of economic misfortune in Nigeria. Through involvement in an act of criminality, The Activist, like

elites in power whom he sets to confront, exploits illegality to enrich himself. He betrays the modest grace to stand righteously. Pere, who teams up with the protagonist in the bunkering business also becomes affluent. This is another way to give false hope to the numerous militants in the creeks who scavenge the street in search of unlawful means of livelihood. The novel x-rays the multi faceted challenges confronting the restoration of sustainable environmental sanity in the Niger Delta. The Activist in the following words reveals that

Though guarded by Mobile Police and army boys.. these very guards... would rather get fat tips from the civilian bunkering lords than do their military duty of guarding the pipelines...They preferred being posted to Liberia where they could have a free range to loot and rape in the name of peacekeeping than guarding the pipelines (p.153)

This atmosphere of endemic corruption constitutes a serious challenge to environmental sustainability in the affected region. This immoral act, as well as persistent youth restiveness, is a pointer to a doomed society portrayed in the novel. The narrator points out to us that;

Everywhere, for country dry well, well, e dry pass harmattan self... You no fit be somebody for this our country now unless you steal.. .If you work hard, you go be rich too. The Activist advised Not for here! If you work hard self and you no steal, na poor man you go die, the driver responded. (p.16-17).

Through the above narrative, the narrator smears the various strata of the Nigerian society with the sharpest fang of indictment, From the Federal government to the military, the oil companies, the local chiefs and even the revolutionist themselves, everyone is prone to corruption. In the society painted here, everyone believes he must engage in some fraud to survive. Even the taxi driver who drives the Activist from the Airport on arrival from America holds firmly to this erroneous belief. In his conversation with the Activist, the driver insists that “Oga self go see for yourself nobody go tell you say life hard for here” (p.143). What the driver says certainly comes to pass as the Activist afterward collaborates with thugs to start oil bunkering in order to source for fund. The fund is intended, ab initio, to prosecute the mission of liberating the down trodden but ends up elsewhere. In the bid to engage in bunkering, Pere meets another character, Owumi who has made fortune from bunkering to get the required detail for the Activist.

Owumi described the process of bunkering to Pere and it looked so simple. But what of soldiers and police guarding everywhere there are oil pipelines? Per asked. Police and soja no be Nigerians? Owumi asked in reply.. .You don see goat dey guard cassava leaves? Or you don see pigeon dey guard corn? Owumi asked Pere. (p.145)

This narrative rips open how the army officers, the police, the influential business men, the revolutionary leaders and thugs are making unlawful fortunes from illegal bunkering. The local chiefs are equally collaborating with the oil companies and bunkers to get their share of the ill-gotten wealth. All these unlawful collaborations among various exploiters are deceptive to the masses. The local chiefs immorally receive fat sums from the companies and their allies for self-enrichment. The story thus indicts every stake holder in the campaign for the emancipation of the Niger Delta people.

Having made it unlawfully, the Activist subsequently abandons the struggle and ventures into politics. He becomes the governor of the Niger Delta and his wife, Ebi the first lady. A protagonist who claims to have abandoned a blissful life overseas to promote a struggle for the emancipation of the impoverished masses becomes a part and parcel of the corrupt system he condemns and attacks. This is a crystal indication of hypocrisy and intellectual mediocrity. A true revolutionary leader will not abandon a set goal. This is why Ahkuemokhan (2014, p143) argues rightly that:

First and foremost, a revolutionary character who will lead the people must not just be a revolutionary character, but a revolutionary leader, an extreme personality who will not relinquish his particular vision of a society. He cannot live 'with the notion that change is both necessary and impossible- the two alternatives never co-habit in the revolutionary mindset. The leader must start a process of change and must complete it, because stopping midway is tantamount to self- annihilation.

The question of leadership should be uppermost in the mind of African writers, though not just leadership in the sense of an individual who can keep the society running, but in the sense of one who can revolutionize the people's condition. It is reassuring to discover that, as far as African writers are concerned, such a leader is a possibility. The kind of revolutionary leader presented by Ojaide in his novel advances a food for thought.

Many critics, except a few, have erroneously described *The Activist* as a monumental literary achievement in Nigerian literature. Okoro (2006, p.1) for instance, posits that "the protagonist, clearly a symbol of the patriotic and visionary Nigerian, irrespective of ethnicity, trades the bliss of life overseas and joins the bandwagon to develop his native land. A memorable narrative populated with characters so vital and real". A similar remark emanates from Ob'i (2006, p.1) when he describes "The Activist as visionary and bold in its attempt to answer the eternal question: What is to be done? At this moment, this book could not be more timely".

On the contrary, this essay strongly argues that *The Activist* profoundly depicts scandalous intellectual mediocrity and extreme poverty of thought in its handling of the characters who lead the pathway in the struggle for freedom and environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta. The protagonist, as well as the other characters, is rather clueless and reckless in his search for solution to the crisis in the region. This critical assertion is well shared by Ikheloa (2007, p.2) when he declares bluntly that:

When I think of Ojaide's latest book, *The Activist*, two words come to my mind-sheer drivel. It fairly reeks of unalloyed mediocrity. There is no sugar coating it. *The Activist* is an inarticulate rendering of a heart wrenching story that still needs to be told. Some books should never have been written. *The Activist* is high up on the list of books that should never see the light of the day. From the beginning to finish, this book is a nightmarish exercise in design and structure.

The Activist who puts up the garb of a revolutionary character trades off the bliss of life overseas only to return and partner with a local thug to engage in illegal bunkering. He persuades himself that he does this in the interest of the long suffering masses of the Niger Delta. Little wonders that Tkheloa (p.3) maintains further that writing the *The Activist* by Ojaide was a

mistake. And certainly reading the novel was a mistake. "I must say with extreme frustration that the reviews I had read about the book were insincere puff pieces that do not advance the cause of Nigerian literature one iota". The *Activist* is apparently a reflection of the Nigerian intellectuals' lack of vision wrapped in suffocating realms of self absorption and narcissism. The story clearly makes a compelling confession that the African elites are clueless when it comes to addressing the plethora of challenges affecting their societies. The various subjects that the novel skims over are poorly articulated. The theme emerges with a sense that the novel had to be published for less than altruistic reasons. In a way, Ikheleloa further remarks that

Ojaide weaves a wretched tale that is at once formulaic and improbable..
 .This one should be tilled under how not to write a novel.. This book is a
 disgusting tale that takes the reader on a bumpy ride through a tunnel
 vision hatched by Nigerian intellectual class. (p.2)

Even though someone needs to rise up and show the world what Nigerian leaders and multi-national oil companies have unleashed on the environment, that somebody is certainly not the protagonist that Ojaide presents to us. The *Activist*, who is the main character, fails woefully in that quest. Those without voices crying in the Niger Delta must continue to pray for the return of a patriotic fellow to stop their dreams from drowning in the ocean. The ideological studies of the Nigerian novels set in the Niger Delta, reveal the realities of despoliation of the environment. The recurring issues such as poverty, disease, illiteracy, corruption, militancy and violence are attributable to some major problems, which are oil exploration and its effect on the human livelihood. This. paper, thus, argues that equally important to the firm outcry of environmental hazard is the campaign against the inordinate tendency of the revolutionary character to accumulate wealth through illegalities and unwholesome practices. Condoning their excesses is detrimental to the cause they champion. To rectify this problem requires the writers to adopt a right ideological perspective in the campaign of liberating the people. The transposition from communal to individual interest erases the consideration for collective survival of the society. It is noteworthy that the leader's insatiable quest for wealth through bunkering as seen in *The Activist* will compound the ecological disaster, thereby bringing more challenges that the society cannot cope with.

Conclusion

Ojaide's novel is replete with evils associated with the exploration of crude oil with their attendant environmental degradation. However, in spite of the outcry against the hazard, there remains a significant step to be taken if the novel is to transcend a mere propaganda. This gap is the dearth of revolutionary leaders to serve the interest of people. This is the major challenge that this paper tends to bring into the front burner. The argument critically revolves around how Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) aesthetically conceptualizes the bane of environmental protection and sustainability as pail of the fast growing corpus of radical literature in Nigeria. The essay profoundly exhibits how intellectual mediocrity and poverty of thought impact negatively on environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta. The argument goes beyond a mere analysis of theme and style to embrace the ethical role of literature in uncovering the pathology of ecological issue in the affected areas. The study shows how a literary text is capable of revealing the depth of environmental crisis and demonstrates its pervasive effects on the livelihood of the inhabitants and their concomitant reactions. It examines the changing nature of the environment through economic activities and policies of government in the Niger-Delta region affected by the

tragedy of oil exploration. Ojaide's novel contributes to our understanding of the weaknesses inherent in Nigerian postcolonial revolutionary ideology.

References

- Akhuemokhan, S. (2014). *The revolutionary characters in the African novels*. Ibadan: Ibadan University press.
- Awhefeada, S. (2012). *Poetic reflections on environmental insecurity in the Niger Delta*. Abraka: Humanities review, special edition.
- Balogun, J. X(2007). "Approaches to modern literary theories". In Obafemi, O, Ajadi, G. and Alabi, V. (Eds) *Critical perspectives in English language and literature*. Ilorin: University of Ilorin. Department of English.
- Burke, K. (2007), *Sociology of Literature* www.kikipedipg.
- Dobie, A. (2012). *Theory to practice: an introduction to literary criticism*. London: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Escerpit, R. (1971) *Sociology of literature*. London: Frank calls and Company Ltd.
- Habib, M. (2011). *Literary criticism: from Plato to the present*. London: Wiley Blackwell Ltd.
- Ikheloa, I.R. (2007). Reviews: "The activist dies in Tanure Ojaide's dreams". *African writers*. <http://www.africanwriters.Literature.writers.ideas.circa2004>
- Lasainbo, L. (2007). Reviews: "The activist by Tanure Ojaide's". *African writers* <http://www.africanwriters.Literature.writers.ideas.circa2004>.
- Obafemi, O. (2008). *Politics & aesthetics: Essays in drama, theatre and performance*. Ilorin: Haytee press and publishing company
- Obi, J. (2007). Review: *The Activist by Tanure Ojaide's Afric* <http://www.africanwriters.literature.writers.ideas>
- Ojaide, T. (2006). *The activist*. Ibadan: Pharaphina publishers.
- Okoro, D. (2007). Reviews: "The activist by Tanure Ojaide's. *Afric writers* <http://www.africanwriters.Literature.writers.ideas.circa2004>