

## **Rethinking the position of women in socio-political affairs: an Ecofeminist study of Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist***

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### **Abstract**

Niger Delta women are affected by environmental crises because of their active participation in the agrarian-based occupation of their society and their nurturing nature as caretakers in the home. Unfortunately, their input and contribution to solutions to environmental crises have often been neglected or, at best disregarded. This paper examines the effects of environmental degradation on humans, especially on women and their participation in socio-political affairs in *The Activist* by TanureOjaide. It analyses the text from an ecofeminist perspective by reviewing the footprints of ecological degradation vis-à-vis their perpetrators and the evolving role of women as active participants in protecting the environment. Ojaide's work advocates women's involvement in socio-political activism.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, socio-political, ecological footprint, environmental crisis.

### **Introduction**

The discovery of oil deposits in the Niger Delta has positively impacted the Nigerian economy. Statistic show that oil revenue accounts for over 95% of export earnings in Nigeria. As such, oil production activity in the Niger Delta has carved a remarkable economic landscape for the country with an enormous contribution to foreign exchange earnings. Unfortunately, much of the population in the oil-producing areas of the Delta relies on fishing, subsistence agriculture and associated processing industries for their livelihood. From an environmental perspective, Ultoi, Madson and Hilderbrandt (1996), Cobb (1997) and Okoji (2000) show that oil exploration in the region creates ecological hazards, such as gas flaring, product spills, discharge of refinery effluents into freshwater sources, drill wastes and the atrophy of forests in the region. Isike and Isike (2016) argue that the resulting extensive and systematic degradation of environmental resources has served to impose enormous burdens on human lives throughout much of the NigerDelta. Some of these are land degradation, food and water poisoning leading to extreme poverty, disease and little or no access to social amenities such as electricity, health care services and schools.

Women constitute half the total population of the country and their role in the survival and continuity of any society is certainly not under contention (Oyebamiji, 2006). Nature which can be interchanged to mean the earth is often personified as a woman because they both give life and nurture their offspring. By their biological makeup, women tend to be more patient and resilient in challenging situations because of their unique relationship with nature as mothers.

What has remained an issue of grave concern is that despite the acknowledged role women play in nation-building and development (Asaju, (2013); Eguvwebere, (2021)), our society has continued to treat them as second-class citizens. Women dominate the NigerDelta's core agricultural-based occupations of farming, fishing and gathering seafood, so they depend directly on the environment for their livelihoods and familial and community sustenance (Isike&Isike 2016).

Consequently, the decimation of the environment as a result of oil exploration activities directly impacts women's economic capacities and value as producers and reproducers in their communities (Koripamo-Agary & Agary (2005)). Women are discriminated against in all political spheres in Nigeria. This discrimination is traced to the Nigerian patriarchal system, which is embedded in our cultural system (Aina, 1998). Asaju (2013) advocates the need for proactive actions to improve gender parity in education. Asiyanbola's (2005) definition of patriarchy explains the unjust elevation of the male authority over the female and the oppression of women in social, political, and economic institutions as well as all forms of decision-making in society (Eguvwebere & Iloilo 2021). Their inability to make decisions on issues affecting them impacts negatively not only the women's livelihoods but the survival and development of their communities. Studies on the Niger-Delta environmental crisis emphasize that women suffer significantly as the struggle to nurture a society devastated by the effect of oil exploration activities (Ikelegbe, 2006)brought about by neo-colonial patriarchal culture marginalizing them in all spheres of public decision-making. Given the enormity of the social, environmental, economic, and political insecurities which pervade the Niger Delta, there is a need for a new and transformative kind of politics (Fayemi, Amadi and Bamidele2005). An inclusive and participatory politics where women are treated as stakeholders alongside the men rather than the current political practices which continue to alienate and oppress women. Agunyai, Odeyemi, and Olawoyin (2014) posit that Niger Delta women do not participate actively in politics because of militancy and kidnapping. Beyond that, the effects of oil pollution on their land and water and the fight over which community benefits from the oil drilling activities cause anxiety, fear and dread among the women and children, who are always the most vulnerable.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The word 'ecology' originated from the biological science of natural environmental systems. It examines how these natural communities come together to strike a balance within the

ecosystem and how such balance can be drastically altered, leading to havoc and death to plant and animal life.

Ecofeminism came into being in the United States during the early 1970s when some women became disillusioned with the mainstream environmental movement and sought to create more awareness among feminists about ecological concerns. It portrays a diversity of theoretical, critical and practical efforts to understand and resist the interrelated oppression and domination of women and nature (Eaton, 2005). Francoise d'Eaubonne first used the term in 1974 to call for a feminist revolution towards ecological survival (Howell, 1997). Ecofeminism argues that the domination and oppression of women through patriarchy and the degradation of nature through the Western model of development are intrinsically linked. Therefore, the degradation of the earth is a metaphor for the rape of women in its many forms. Ecofeminism, therefore, treats ecological crisis and the subjugation of women as manifestations of the same ailment.

Ecofeminist theory extensively analyses domination tailored toward women's oppression and the environment's exploitation. The approach advocates the unification of ecological and feminist principles as guiding lights for political participation and inclusiveness and the creation of ecological, socially equitable lifestyles. Environmental Feminism aims to promote women and the environment by incorporating women into socio-political affairs, where they will, in turn, help bring about ideas that will bring about a sustainable environment for all.

### **Ecological Footprint in Ojaide's *The Activist***

The ecological footprint measures the impact of man's activities on the environment. It further examines the effect of such activities on the sustainability of the environment. Wackernangel and Rees (1996) define ecological footprint as the land area needed to meet people's consumption and absorb their waste. It measures the required land area needed to provide food, water and shelter for the people inhabiting the area. The ecological footprint can be positive or negative. When positive, it means that the identified land area can effectively sustain its population. When negative, it shows that the activities carried out in the area make the land unsustainable leading to an ecological deficit in the area (Lenzen and Murry 2003).

The *Activist* begins with the negative footprints of environmental degradation. The Activist, who is the protagonist in the story, left the country to study in the United States because of the massacre of his people by the soldiers and mobile police instigated by the military and the major oil companies because his people dared to expose the degree of environmental degradation

and pollution caused by the activities of oil exploration to foreign journalists. The Activist returns after his years of academic sojourn to his country to discover that oil production has drastically improved, ranking his country in the sixth position in OPEC but unfortunately plunging the country into a wasteland.

Ojaide depicts the working of the patriarchal institution comprising the military government, Bell Company, the chiefs and leaders of the communities as they all contribute to giving the Niger Delta a new face of horror. The Activist and Ebi's picnic at the Great River gives an insight into the magnitude of the pollution of the water, which shocked them:

Where were the flying fish that used to shoot out of the water into the air...? The water was no longer the herb-dark draught... it was light Green, greasy and smelly. The large fish population had either been decimated by chemicals from oil industries or migrated into the ocean (p. 84).

The small riverine town of Emekerogha, which used to be famous for fishing, is now known for selling "iced fish," which has become the primary source of protein for the people who used to take their fresh catches to Warri and Port Harcourt for sale (p. 85). The Federal Military Government's supposed promise about revitalizing industries in the Niger Delta in the form of distributing imported fishing nets to riverine communities, another name for the Niger Delta, ironically takes place in Inland Abuja, the nation's capital. The minister of Agriculture and Water Resources who is to distribute the gift had not visited the Niger Delta and so did not know that there was no more fish to catch in many of the creeks, streams and rivers. The blowouts and gas flares poisons had asphyxiated most lives underwater (p. 183).

In mapping out the footprint of the ecological crisis, the Activist observed that "our people watch their waters turn to poison; the land becomes crust from blowouts and the air become hot from poisonous gas (p. 86). The Niger Delta includes both the land and the people. Just as the land, air and rivers were being poisoned, so were the residents. He (the Activist) had observed upon his return the epidemic of dysentery and worm diseases that afflict the people, noting that the paradise of the olden days was degenerating fast into a kind of hell. The water that used to be an elixir had become a poisonous brew (p. 87).

Similarly, the multinational company and the government exploit and bribe those they need to by providing them with luxuries to silence the local population from demanding compensation for their despoiled environment. Bell Company believes their ongoing negotiation

with the military government and the local monarch is enough to suppress the people. These negotiations often lead to huge losses of lives and properties. The concerned persons amass wealth and favour from the oil companies and allow them to use substandard materials for their activities (p. 111). An instance within the text is a blowout at Roko village as a result of the fact that the pipes crossing the village burst and caught fire. The pipes were shoddily laid to the oil installation a long time ago when oil was discovered in the area when oil prices were skyrocketing in the world market because of increased demands. These pipes crossed the playgrounds of children, and cassava farms of the women and even went through many parts of the village. Residential homes stood on both sides of pipelines. When the villagers protested many years ago about these many pipelines crisscrossing their villages, the oil companies bribed their chief to tell them they were safe (p. 154). With the outburst of crude oil that easily caught fire, the village burnt to the ground. The oil company did nothing; they made no effort to cater to the refugee population rather, they stated that the native population was sabotaging their pipelines.

In his speech, Professor Tobore Ede whose task was to appease the students who proposed a protest claimed the villagers set their village on fire because they wanted to extort money from Bell Oil Company. Elaborating further, he explained that none of these villagers had a farm as they used to; none go fishing in water; instead, they sit at home idling. In his arrogance, he forgets that these villagers were idle not by choice but by the oil company's activities. (p. 174).

Furthermore, the Egba boys of whom Pere is their leader, claim, "they were fighters attempting not only to reclaim what had been robbed from them but also holding firmly to what was theirs that others were attempting to snatch away" (p. 47). The Egba boys thrive on violence, unleashing all their pent-up frustration on the Bell Company and the community. Also, the Activist, Pere and the military are involved in the oil bunkering business, further despoiling the earth. The Activist's philosophy of attacking and hurting destroyers of the natural environment sees him doing the same thing he claims he fights against, thereby destroying the natural environment.

Graphic evidence of the destruction of the Niger Delta wetlands, aviaries, and farmlands, as well as of the community as a result of oil spillage, further traces the footprints of degradation of the environment.

There were pictures of impoverished people in dugouts paddling towards the ocean to have a catch... coloured pictures of lakes and streams with green water. There were also pictures of children sitting beside gas flaring sites and innocently inhaling poisonous gas and of pregnant women sitting in front of their homes with blowouts less than a hundred yards away (p. 205).

All these activities centre on violence and anger, negatively impacting the environment and leaving the communities worse off. The women, children and environment are the worst hit by their greed, negligence and violence.

### **Ecofeminist Study of *The Activist* by Tanure Ojaide**

"Changing Tides" the last part of the narrative, ushers in the integration of women into environmental issues. In the earlier parts of the narrative, the women have been on the sideline in making decisions concerning socio-political affairs as all meetings between the government and community representatives were held without representation from the women. Unfortunately, all resolutions put up by the men involve violence. Bell Company continues to fragment Niger Delta into groups, resulting in an extensive clash that took many lives. The oil company and the military government did nothing to quell the fight. The women began to think deeply about their plight and that of their men, children and collective future. Since they observed how ineffective and worse their communities are with the advent of oil, the women (p.188).

Their land's exploitation has invariably impacted the oppression of women and children. During a meeting initiated by Mrs Timi Taylor, who took the initiative to bring the women together, she observed that the oil wealth is intoxicating the Federal Military Government and the oil companies and they are hurting the Niger Delta people in their lack of sobriety (p. 190). She further encourages the women to share whatever is adversely affecting their womanhood. The women complained of their difficulty conceiving; their pregnant women were delivering malformed babies; their men were losing their manhood at a very early age; early start of menstruation and menopause for their young girls and women. At the centre of all these problems the women enumerated is the debacle of oil discovered in the area. With the advent of oil extraction came the pipes. All the storks, kingfishes, weaver birds, sunbirds and many others had disappeared. The herbs and flowers 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.

Now the human population was suffering from ill health. In addition to losing curatives for known ailments, new sicknesses had come in without a known cure (p. 193). Ojaide depicts the twin rape of women and nature, the plight of the Niger Delta women and the destruction of

the environment. These two events are caused by the decisions and counter decisions taken by the men, driven by patriarchy, which creates an avenue for women's participation in socio-economic and political affairs. (WODEFOR) Women of the Delta Forum, a coordinating committee to undertake ways to bring about peace and development to the Niger Delta, has become an ecofeminist mechanism for women's integration and inclusion into the socio-economic affairs of the Niger Delta. The formation of WODEFOR ushers the women to the negotiating table with the Bell Company. The aborted nude march becomes the fulcrum for the changing tide as "the women's thoughtfully planned action was fulfilled cosmically – they brought down tyrants that their men failed to remove" (p. 217).

### **Conclusion**

Women have been known to be more result-oriented in their struggles against State oppression and exploitation in the Niger Delta. When they have to protest, and often they do only as a last resort, they are usually well-coordinated, non-destructive and peaceful even in disagreements. Childs, S and Krook, M (2008) affirm that their representation creates more impact when they unite as one and work together. Olugbu's (2019) interrogation of the motif behind the nude protest by the women against Bell Oil Company confirms Ojaide's sympathy towards the plight of the Niger Delta women and underscores the ecofeminist tendencies inherent in the text. From the actions played out in the text, *The Activist*, Niger Delta women bring different values into politics. These values tend to enhance the quality of their representation in socio-political affairs bringing about the much sought-after peace and development in the Niger Delta. Unlike the men and youth whose engagement with oil companies and with the federal government have always tended to deviate from the development objective of the struggle resulting in unrest and conflict among the masses, WODEFOR's engagement shows an unwavering focus and commitment to community development and peace rather than promoting their agenda. This is because these women are empathic and tend to empathize with community needs. They respond to conflict by embracing peace and adopting collaborative methods of engagement. Also, since the injured and dead in conflicts are often their sons, husbands and brothers, women tend to focus on the cessation of violence and rebuilding their homes, families and communities. Ojaide's *The Activist* shows that patriarchal politics has failed the people of the Niger Delta, including women who constitute most of the population. This failure is evidenced in the litany of human insecurities: environmental, economic, health, and communal, which sum up the Niger Delta paradox of extreme poverty in the face of

enormous wealth. The women's participation in confronting the two evils (Military government and Bell Company) that bedevilled the Niger Delta community ushers in a new way of bringing about peace and development to their nation-state.

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