

**Beyond the Borders of
Counter-Discourse: A Neocolonial
Interrogation of Tanure Ojaide's
The Activist and Othuke Ominiaboh's
*A Conspiracy of Ravens***

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Abstract

Postcolonial studies, in African literature, have grown beyond 'counter-discourse(s) or writing-back', to dismantle Western hegemony, the myth of African inferiority, and correcting erroneous impressions and other Eurocentric miscreations of Africa at colonialism, to an introspective examination of new forms of western infiltration and exploitation of the postcolony. This study, therefore, investigates new forms of colonial traits in post-independence Nigerian societies with attention to Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Othuke Ominiaboh's *A Conspiracy of Ravens*. In doing this, the study applies postcolonial theory, which is useful in examining colonial topicalities beyond the classic colonizing activities of the British Empire and at present, the crises of neocolonialism. This study therefore is an attempt to show that postcolonial discourse transcends the borders of counter-discourse as it engages literatures of former colonies after the official end of colonialism to denounce and satirise emerging ills and foibles inimical to progress in the postcolony.

Key Words: Postcolonial Studies, Colonial Traits, Neocolonialism, Tanure Ojaide, Othuke Ominiaboh

Introduction

African prose fiction remains socially convincing because it recreates the sociopolitical experiences of the African continent. It has remained committed to the prevailing questions of the postcolony which impede

progress. This stand point is well expressed by Ezekiel Fajenyo and OluOsunde (1994) thus: malaise

Nigerian and other African writers in whatever literary genre which they have chosen to project their visions cannot but be largely influenced by the wave of socio-political dilemma which is the picture of experienced gloom within the social milieu. The sensibility of the writer cannot be impinged upon in his capacity as a visionary by varying degrees of frightening tribulations to which most African countries have since become exposed, not so much for colonial experience, as for the total absence of political seriousness, economic structure bereft of democratic ideals (P.20).

Femi Osofisan's quoted in Muyiwa Awodija (2010) lends credence to the foregoing when he says that:

We (African writers) had to use the weapon we had - our pen, our zeal and our eloquence to awake in our people the song of liberation. With our writing we would wash away the stigma of inferiority, rouse our dormant energies, and unmask the pest and traitors among us. Our works would be a weapon to the country to the foremost rank of modern nation (pp.33-34).

It therefore means that African literature since inception plays a significant role in the social re-education, re-orientation and redirection of humanity and society. At the first level, the African creative writer to include the (novelist) engages in the socio-psychological development of Africans. Chinua Achebe (1975) recognizes this pre-eminent role of helping the African society regains itself and put away the complex of the years of denigration and self-abasement. The writer needs to counter racism, to announce not just that Africans are as good as the foreigners, but that they are even much better. This is necessary because no meaningful development in the political and economic spheres can be achieved without pride and confidence in oneself. Achebe (1973) also shares this view when he opines that African writer's most fundamental preoccupation should be to educate the world:

that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had philosophy of great depth and values and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity(p.3)

The need for a socio-psychological reorientation, self-assertion of the African people during the colonial domination, was shared by other Africans and found expression in such works as CamaraLaye's *The African child*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The River Between*. Writings of the colonial period no doubt were geared at countering Western hegemony. They contested the question of genuine African freedom with the aim of countering the "negative assumptions" and the raging and despicable exploitative structures instituted by the colonialist.

With the attainment of independence in the sixties by many African states, and the seeming departure of the white men from the centre of power, African literature has witnessed a lot of changes based on the social realities of the moment. The emphasis and focus of the African creative writer changed from the colonialist to the new crop of Africans who assumed the seat of power exited by the colonialist and the new forms through which Europeans and Americans are infiltrating and subjecting the former colonies. It is obvious that independence did not mark the end to western hegemony and exploitation.

Ezechi Onyerionwu (2010) citing Achebe, in 'ImeIkiddeh: His Legacy in Literary Criticism' provocatively captures this shift from the subject of colonial injustices to tackle a new predicament that raise its ugly head in the post-independent milieu thus:

A new situation has arisen. One of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice. Should we keep at the old theme of racial injustice (sore as it still is) when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I think not. (4).

The new wave of postcolonial discourse is characterised by neo-colonialism, which is described by Oyegoke (2006, p. 289) as 'new hegemony'. In other words, neo-colonialism is an indirect form of control by the western world over Africa and other continents formerly

under colonial rule. This time it is not directly as in the colonial years but indirectly through the new African leaders. It exists in the acts of powerful Western countries controlling the former colonies by trade, religion, culture or other means which have made the much vaunted self-rule a mess. This is succinctly captured by Ngugi wa Thiong'o when he submits that, imperialism has continued to control the economy, politics and cultures of the margin even after colonialism. After the decentering of the 'old centre', the new centre originates within the 'old margin' and furthers the exploitation and imperialism of the 'old centre' (p.4).

Neo-colonialism, therefore, suggests continuity with colonial legacies. Its emphasis is on the new modes and forms of the old colonialist practices. The term, "neo-colonialism", according to Ella Shohat designates broad relations of geo-economic hegemony (4). Neo-colonialism is another form of imperialism, where industrialised powers interfere politically and economically in the affairs of post-independent nations. For Amilcar Cabral, neo-colonialism is "an outgrowth of classical colonialism" (pp.120-121). R. J. C. Young (2010) refers to neocolonialism as "the last stage of imperialism" in which a postcolonial country is unable to deal with the economic domination that continues after the country gained independence (44-52). Altbach (1995) regards neo-colonialism as "partly planned policy" and a "continuation of the old practices" (pp.452-46).

The foregoing prompted modern African writers to employ their creative works as a tool for social and societal transformation and re-engineering. In doing this, they reflect on the hard socio-political as well as religious, and economic realities of the people.

Achebe in a similar voice affirms the dissatisfaction of writers with the new crop of leaders who took over from the colonial masters thus:

...having fought with the nationalist movement and had been on the side of the politicians/realized after independence, that they and/we were on different sides, because they were not Adekunle Olowonmi doing what we had agreed they should do. So I had to become a critic ... (quoted in Adekunle Olowonmi; 2008).

The post-colonial or post-independence literary production thus represents a category of diachronically grouped African literature in the literature of national experience, neo-colonialism and post-colonial disillusionment (David Ker 2003; Ayo Kehinde 2005), characterised as social realist/socialist realist texts, because the writer of this mode makes use of events in his/her society as objecting artistic truths to reveal absurdities just as he/she encourages profound ethos from his or her cultural environment that contributes to universal experience or ideals.

The foregoing therefore implies that post-colonial literature often involves writings that explore issues of decolonization or the political and cultural independence of a people subjected to colonial rule and domination, on the one hand, and the socio-political realities and experiences of these people under the rulership (self-rule) of their own people after the colonial era, on the other hand.

Neocolonial Realities in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist and Othuke Iminiabhos' A Conspiracy of Ravens*

The attainment of independence in Nigeria was supposed to usher in the long awaited change in the people's lives from external aggression that they have been subjected to in the hand of the colonialist. But on the contrary, the independent nation is still being subjected to one form of external control or the other. This is depicted in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Othuke Iminiabhos' *A Conspiracy of Ravens*.

The Activist is an apt depiction of the incursion of the West into former dependent nations of the world, especially Nigeria. It paints a vivid and clear picture of how foreign agents are invading the Niger Delta milieu and tapping the inherent natural resources in the environment without recourse to the people's welfare. In other words, *The Activist* represents the unsavoury experiences of the people of the Niger Delta as it relates to leadership, politics and socio-economic activities in contemporary Nigeria.

Ojaide in the novel unmasks neo-colonialism in its new faces. He denounces the colonial legacies that are still in operation in this age of globalization. Just like the colonial era where the indirect rule system, saddled village Chiefs and Heads, elites and Monarchs with

responsibilities of organising their people to enhance colonial activities and domination. In same vein, in *The Activist*, Village Chiefs, elites and Monarchs are used to demolish and calm down any opposition to the exploration of oil. This no doubt is a continuation of the 'indirect rule system' in the modern age. The traditional rulers and elites in the novel are presented as vehicles of neo-colonialism. This is well expressed in the weariness of the Area Boys toward the Activist:

... it was a matter of time before the oil explorers recruited him as a community development officer to sell his people for pay. After all, what was a community development officer other than an overseer for the white man in a global age, used by the outsiders to stop his own people from demanding justice and fair compensation (P.80).

Fundamentally, neocolonialism in the text is driven by the operation of the oil company whose inordinate hunger for more barrels of oil to increase yearly record profits has gradually turned the Niger Delta land into a wasteland. The Activist's fled on asylum as a youth to the United State of America because of the massacre of his people by soldiers and mobile police working at the behest of the military government and the major oil company to wipe out his village. Chief Ishaka's conversation with his son, Dennis, also goes a long way to show how far enmeshed the multinationals are in the economic exploitation of the Niger Delta:

...the federal government has already sold the rights for prospecting oil on our land to the foreigners. They call it oil-prospecting concession... By the Land Use Decree and the many concessions already sold out, what's in our land has been taken from us and is no longer ours to take back even if we knew how to (pp.143, 144)

Ojaide further reveals the new grip of imperialism/colonialism in the novel through the carting away of the Niger Delta resources (oil) to develop the Europe and America. This is seen in the opinion of the area boys:

To the area boys, Bell Oil Company stole their wealth to develop its owners' countries overseas and left them impoverished (P.77).

In a similar vein, the Activist further underscores this claim thus:

Bell Oil naim self e dey look after, not us. We never reach dem place but we know say e better pass here...Na dream world demdey live for their place, we dey the hell, they create for black man... (p.116)

Closely related to the foregoing, is the domination of white men in the exploration of the rich natural resources (oil) in the Niger Delta region. Ojaide, using Chief Ishaka as his mouth piece, denounces this form of neo-colonialism. He observed that:

all the engineers were white people. The few Nigerians at the senior staff level were administrators, including the community development officers, who knew nothing about how the oil was extracted from the soil. The foreign engineers used the middle- ranked workers trained at the Petroleum Training Institute Effurun to do the tedious job without teaching them the full knowledge of the drilling. Chief Ishaka felt Nigerian engineers were needed to know how petroleum was drilled. He wondered whether his people or the national government had one day stopped to reflect on what would happen if all the foreign engineers pulled out. Would the situation not be better if an indigene that knew the environment as an engineer drilled for oil in a way that would save the land save the land from the negative excesses of the foreign drillers? Who would empathize more with the fate of crops than the sons and daughters of farmers? Who would protect the creeks, streams, and rivers more than the children of the fisher men and women? (p.178)

The above quotation captures how knowledge is still being used as a tool of oppression. Edward Said quoted in Bill Ashcroft (1995) is of the opinion that 'knowledge and power' are the two indivisible foundations of imperial authority. He puts it thus:

The most formidable ally of economic and political control had long been the business of ‘knowing’ other people because this ‘knowing’ underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which they were increasingly persuaded to know themselves: that is, as subordinate to Europe, (p.1)

Consequently, this process of ‘knowing’ has led to a repetition of a history of oppression, exploitation and enslavement, and once again struggling for freedom from continuous sapping of the Niger Delta mineral resources. It has also made the whites superior to the blacks as they now employed to carry out the dirty and tedious job, without being exposed to the full knowledge of drilling. This indirect form of controlling Africa’s territories and subjecting Africa even after the official end to colonialism is what N. Hodges (1976) describes thus:

the independent countries of Africa were indeed dependent since they did not possess the requisite jurisdiction and control of the wealth within their own boundaries, remaining cruelly susceptible to foreign manipulation and domination, (p. 246).

However, it is in a bid to denounce neo-colonialism and ameliorate the poor plight and suffering of the Niger Delta people that Chief Ishaka sent his son, Dennis to study Petroleum Engineering, at the University of Lagos. This, according to him, is for Dennis to be an engineer among the white people and learn the technicality behind oil exploration and drilling:

Do it, my son. One day you should find yourself in Bell Oil Company or in any other oil companies as an engineer among the white people, (p.178).

Consequently, Dennis is absorbed as a senior administrative officer but deprived of going to the rig where oil exploration takes place. This, by inference, is a deliberate attempt to prevent the black man from having access to the nitty-gritty of oil exploration, so as to remain subjected to the superiority of the white man. Dennis, for three years, is restricted to the confines of the office, after which he is transferred to Amsterdam, the Company’s international headquarters. This suggests a complete alienation from where he can interfere with oil exploration activities.

A Conspiracy of Raven is remarkably similar to *The Activist* in realisation to neocolonial ideologies as they play out today in former colonies. It explores the traits and indices of neocolonialism. Here, the novelist underscores some of the ways the Western world is still infiltrating, dominating and exploiting the former colonies in the era after independence as in economic, social and intellectual dominance. In the novel, one discovers the intervention and incursion of Europe and America in the form of skilled knowledge and rescue mission. For instance, Mr Andre Parker an American is the Managing Director of Shell and the man overseeing the production of crude oil in the country.

...Shell had carved billions of dollars off the region.
Andre was well aware of the effects of their explorations
(p. 58)

However, the money and wealth he makes from crude production is invested in America. For instance, he built a nice villa in Houston. This explicitly shows how the Niger Delta region's resources and the wealth of the nation are carted away to the Western world like it was during colonial era.

In a conversation at an open-air bar amongst the men there, one of them, Slow-talker identifies the Westerners as part of their nation's problem:

“who told you the white investors are not part of the problem? Are they not the ones who take the crude oil away, joining hands with our government to cheat the people? Their actions are ... (p. 201)

Furthermore, the conversation between Tari and Brooke Cochlain at the creek further foregrounds the incursion of white expatriates into former colonies to plunder and exploit the postcolony. Tari puts it thus:

We are peaceful people, a wealthy people with silver and gold buried within our lands... From the bowels of our lands come the much sought after liquid, the black gold which drives the engines of modern civilization. More than eighty percent of Nigeria's annual income is got from these lands... but it is ironic, that as wealthy as we

are, we are so poor. The foreign companies have been tapping this liquid gold from our lands for years, enriching themselves with our oil (p. 87)

The perceived superiority of the Westerners is brought to the fore during a meeting with the President Rufus Sylvia after the kidnap of the expatriates. When the expatriates were kidnapped, Agent Alex Randa is brought in on a rescue mission:

That's where you come in... Your success precedes you and that is why you come highly recommended by your agency, the DSS... we need you to secure the release of the hostages ... (p. 95)

Also, the conversation between Alan and Odogwu in the Open-air bar in the Niger Delta region also entrench the dominance and superiority of the West over their former colonies via knowledge. Akan as a way of reply to his friend on hearing that the militants are demanding for resource control upholds the superiority of the whites and Euro-American when he says:

How can we man those machines when we import ordinary toothpick all the way from China. Without the whiteman, do you really think we can prospect for oil or even drill it? (200).

Further on, the novelist through Disieye questions the rationale behind the new encroachment of the Western nations into African dominating their affairs. He also uses her to crusade against neocolonialism and its virulent manifestations in contemporary times. She puts it thus:

Why do you people even come here?

You call us all sorts of names: barbarians, locals, monkeys-all sorts.

Yet you still come here. Why do you leave behind all your riches and still come here to this place where we struggle for every damn thing? Why do you come to take away the little we have? (P.248)

She goes down history to substantiate her claim on white dominance of the black by recalling what her father told her long ago. She says:

My father always told me how arrogant the white man is, how he thinks he owns the world because of the colour of his skin. I used to think papa was just being judgemental, but now I know he was right. You people think you can go wherever you please and do whatever you wish and get away with it. You came to the wrong place this time (P. 248).

Subtly, the novelist shows us the dominance of third world nations by the West through knowledge as exemplified in the intervention of Brooke Cochlain, the British journalist, and Ender Collins, an American ex-Ranger in the rescue of Alex from prison when Air Chief Marshal Dagogo detains her to forestall the amnesty programme for the militants and to avenge the death of his son by the militants at Bonga. Also, the ingenuity of Brooke Cochlain in investigative journalism, as a British reporter helps in unearthing diverse conspiracy working against the government of President Rufus Sylvat and the unity of the nation. Through her investigative probings into Niger Delta crises, the looted fund in the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and the raging regional clamour, the enemies of the nation are exposed and the plan for secession by General Azoro is exposed. Furthermore, the stout nature and in-depth tactics of Ender Collins in security affairs leads to the rescue of the hostages by the militant in the creek which the Nigerian security agencies could not dare to do (P.375).

From the foregoing, one can say that the novels are interrogations of neocolonial indices and the post independent Nigerian writers' commitment to liberate their societies from the hard grip of external and internal oppression, exploitation, ill-treatment acting as clogs in the wheel of progress of independent Nigerian and other African states.

Conclusion

The neocolonial inclination of Ojaide and Ominiabohs clearly show that African creative writers have moved beyond counter -writings of outrightly affirming their identity, cultural values and dignity to a crusade

against new forms of Western oppression, exploitation and marginalization in contemporary times. This is more dangerous because its system of operation leads to poor development and economic dependence on the countries involved. In contemporary Nigeria today, neo-colonialism is a mighty obstacle which prevents the countries from experiencing meaningful development. This goes to show that post-independence Nigerian writers are still very much alive in the crusade against all forms of eternal hegemony. Thus, they have employed their novels as an imaginative catalyst of socio-political and economic re-engineering.

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