

**Character's Proactive
Consciousness in the African
Novel: A Postcolonial Reading Of
Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist***

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Abstract

The incidence of oil boom in Nigeria and the attendant doom for the people of the Niger Delta region has continued to incite creativity. Many of these writings focus on the people of this degraded, neglected, disfigured and devastated minority community in the Nigerian nation. Tanure Ojaide, a poet, novelist and scholar is certainly one of the leading voices from this region. He has consistently bemoaned the predicaments of his people as a result of oil exploration and exploitation. In *The Activist*, Ojaide lends his voice to the need of the people of this region to shun selfishness and make sacrifices in order to get rid of the powers that hold them down. Through the proper deployment of narrative techniques such as character, voice, action, setting and metaphor, Ojaide calls on the people of the Niger Delta region to rise above the complacent acceptance of their neglect, dispossession, deprivation and misrepresentation from the selfish and insensitive Nigerian government who are in collaboration with multinational oil companies. Using the Postcolonial theoretical paradigm, as well as the qualitative research methodology, this paper sets out to examine Ojaide's fictional contribution to the existing oeuvre on the predicaments of the people of this neglected region and his call for a positive change. This is with the aim of creating consciousness on the urgent need to pay attention to both fictional and factual voices from the region crying for sincere human and physical development of their homeland.

Key Words: Ojaide, Postcolonial, Niger Delta, Degradation, Neglect, Character, Resistance

Introduction

Literature, particularly fiction is reputed for reflecting and refracting events and experiences of the people in the writer's society. In Africa for instance, from colonial period to the present day, works of fiction have consistently chronicled the predicaments and experiences of Africans under imperial powers, as well as their challenges as decolonized people. For instance, during the period of colonization, African novelists such as Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugiwa Thiong'o in *Weep Not, Child*, recounted the oppression and repression of the natives by colonial powers, as well as the nation's resistance in their respective African colonies. In these two novels, both Okonkwo and members of Ngotho's family took decisive steps to retrieve their lost rights from the powers that held them down. Again, following the failure of indigenous leaders to deliver the promises of independence to their people, African writers have not relented in exposing their mediocrity, as well as governments' misplacement of priorities in their respective nations. It is this failure on the part of leadership that has incited such works as Ben Okri's *Famished Road*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *Our Children Are Coming*, wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*, Wizard of the Crow and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. It is pertinent to know that each of these texts has activist characters who take decisive steps to resist oppressors and retrieve lost rights and entitlements.

Specifically, the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in the 1950s brought about the exploration and exploitation of this natural resources. Oil exploration activities in this region resulted in the degradation of the environment, as well as the dehumanization of the people of this region. With these activities the people who are mainly farmers and fishermen lost their farmlands and fishing ponds to unending oil spills. This unfortunate predicament has given birth to quite a number of works of imagination from writers who hail from this region. In their works, they do not only expose the abject poverty evident in this region despite their natural endowment, but also bring to the fore, the various steps taken by the locals in order to survive the hunger and pollution that daily stare them in the face. Such writers and their works include Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Vincent Egbuson's *Love My Planet*, Chimeka Garrick's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. Tanure Ojaide is globally noted for his numerous collections of poetry that chronicle various aspects of the life and struggles of the

people of his Niger Delta region. He is also a prolific fictional writer. Amongst his works of fiction are *God's Medicine- Men and Other Stories*, *God's Naked Children: Selected and new stories* and others. *The Activist* is arguably his most popular and widely read novel. But before we delve substantively into Ojaide's preoccupation in *The Activist*, we shall consider the theoretical framework on which our argument is anchored.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the postcolonial theoretical paradigm in the analysis of our primary text. In everyday discourse, the term "Postcolonialism" is used to refer to the period "after" colonization. In other words, it is used to refer to the period following the departure of European powers from their various colonies in Third World nations. However, in the study of issues concerning this historical domination of the Third World by the West, the term "Postcolonialism" is usually alternated with "Postcolonial studies". Thus, both terms - "Postcolonialism" and "Postcolonial studies" imply the study of the legacies of inequality, oppression, and dispossession that European colonialism brought and left behind in their colonies of Asia, Africa and the Americas. They both refer to the study of the communities, practices and discourses concerning the people of former colonies since colonization first occurred till date. It is on this premise that Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, argue that the space and scope of the term postcolonialism covers:

All the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression (2).

Thus, the major concern of postcolonialism or postcolonial studies is the intellectual examination of the economic, social, political and emotional effects on cultures and societies affected by this historical interaction. Alternatively, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, defines postcolonial studies as:

An academic discipline featuring methods of intellectual discourse that analyze, explain and respond to the cultural

legacies of colonialism and of imperialism to the human consequences of controlling a country and establishing settlers for the economic exploitation of the native people and their land. (*Wikipedia*)

On his part, M. H Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines postcolonial studies as “the critical analysis of the history, culture, and modes of discourses that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France and other imperial powers” (227). In literary discourse, major proponents of the postcolonial theory and their major works include Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, Homi Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*, Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. At the core of postcolonial literary theory is the need to give ears and voices to marginalized people, particularly those at the margins of unequal relationships whose voices have been silenced by dominant ideologies of colonial and neo colonial hegemony. Postcolonial literature is foregrounded on the historical resistance to colonial denigration of the native and his culture in colonial discourses. Its major preoccupation is to critique, analyze and respond to the intellectual discourses of European colonization. However, following the attainment of independence by the people of the various colonies of Europe, postcolonial literature currently addresses the problems and consequences of independence in formally colonized nations; it portrays the reconstruction of these nations without the debasing frames of reference used by the colonial masters, while proffering ways on how these indigenous communities can advance towards the attainment of civilization, mutual respect, freedom, liberty, justice, fairness, and equity for all, irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, gender or religion.

Thus, whenever a writer or a critic, particularly those from formerly colonized world, portrays issues of dispossession, exploitation and inequality in their works, with the aim of creating awareness on the need for positive change, he/she is termed a postcolonial writer or critic. In other words, a postcolonial critic is expected to analyze discourses about the people of former European colonies with his/her critical lens focused on how the writer has addressed these issues of dispossession and inequality through the basic elements of the novel such as language, plot, setting, characters’ voices and actions.

To help my analysis, I apply the post-colonial theoretical strand of Homi Bhabha captured in his works entitled “Narrating the Nation” (1990) and *Location of culture* (1994) to evaluate actions and behaviours of characters, government and multinational oil companies as depicted in Ojaide’s *The Activist*. It is the need to narrate in details the experiences of those at the margins of the nation space that Bhabha has christened *DissemiNation*. In *DissemiNation*, Bhabha maintains that there is symbiotic relationship between the nation and its narrative discourses. In these works, he insists that colonialism is not something locked in the past but also exists in the present. Here, he particularly identifies contemporary third world nations as still colonized despite their claim to many years of socio-political independence. He further asserts that this new form of colonialism is best captured in each independent nation’s narrative discourses. This according to him is because a nation’s narrative discourses give us deep insight into her historical, political and social facts. It is on this premise that he defines postcolonial criticism thus:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and even forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimonies of Third World countries and the discourses of East and West (171).

The setting and depictions in Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist* align with Bhabha’s postulation that post-colonial criticism bears witness to the obvious inequality in third world countries. Set in the Niger Delta region of the Nigerian nation, the novel exhibits neocolonialist power represented by the government, multinational oil companies as well as local collaborators who are bent on dispossessing the natives of their rights and entitlements. On the other hand, the dispossessed and marginalized are represented by the protagonist and all those engaged in activism for collective good of people of the Niger Delta region. In the light of the foregoing concerns expressed, situations portrayed, and characters delineated in Ojaide’s *The Activist*, the postcolonial literary criticism is an appropriate conceptual framework for our analysis.

Character's Proactive Consciousness in *the Activist*: Discussion and Analysis

By “character and consciousness”, we mean ‘activist ‘characters who are conscious of the existing neglect, injustice and inequality in the nation, and the need for action geared towards the attainment of the desired change. Usually, such characters act as pro-active agents and educate other ‘unconscious’ characters on the need to take necessary actions in order to engender the desired change.

In terms of its narration, with its flashbacks, and third person omniscient narrator, Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist* is a conscious representation of action and how neglected people of the Niger Delta region have chosen to deal with their own impoverishment by those who exploit and dispossess them of the wealth accruing from their natural resources. Through this narrative Ojaide engages the voices of his characters in order to expose the degree of oil exploration, exploitation and environmental degradation of the people of his Niger Delta Region. In terms of character, Ojaide delineates characters along the lines of binary opposites of “activism for collective good”, and “betrayal for selfish reasons”. Those on the side of activism for collective good include the nameless protagonist simply known as “The Activist”, Students’ Union Government (SUG), Chief Ishaka, Pere and his Area Boys, Ebi Omasheye, Mrs Taylor and members of the Women of Delta Forum (WODEFOR). On the other side of the divide are those who frustrate and betray the indigenous people for selfish and pecuniary reasons. Foremost of these exploiters are the multinational oil companies led by the Anglo-Dutch Bell Oil Company. They have the support of the government, represented by the dark goggled military Head of State, Mustapha Ali Dongo. As the commander in chief of the nation’s security apparatus, the military junta protects the insensitive oil exploiters by deploying armed mobile police, soldiers, and masked navy personnel to hound down all dissenting voices. The natives are also among these betrayers. They include Professor Tobore Ede, Chief Dogho, Chief Tebele, Chief Fatakpa, HRM Apo 1, and Chief Okiti.

The plot of Ojaide’s *The Activist* evolves around the nameless protagonist who is simply identified as “The Activist”. In the opening section entitled “Life of Activism”, we encounter The Activist on an un-announced homeward journey from the United States of America. His

decision to return after twenty five years sojourn there, stems from the love for his Niger Delta region. He is determined to contribute his own quota in the development of this exploited region and her people. He has come home to throw his weight behind the masses in order to retrieve their lost rights. He hopes to succeed in this venture because he has been an active participant in numerous protests in America, Rio de Jenairo and other parts of the globe. Thus, his home coming is to bring his protest experience to bear on his own exploited people and their polluted environment. Through his ruminations in this opening section, we are let into the picture of the state of the Nigerian nation, particularly the Niger Delta region. The Activist's community is devastated by the activities of multinational oil companies led by Bell Oil Company. Meanwhile, Bell oil is working in collaboration with the Military Head of State named Mustapha Ali Dongo. The prerogative of these security apparatus is to thoroughly deal with all dissenting voices against the exploitation and environmental degradation which have become the lot of the people of the region.

Meanwhile, the Activist takes up a lecturing job with the Niger Delta University from where he intends to throw his weight behind the exploited people of his region. While trying to integrate himself into his society, he is taken aback by the negative reactions and attitudes of his close friends and family members. Contrary to his expectation, his friend, Dr. Baribo Mukoro and other kinsmen are unhappy with him for jettisoning the luxury in America for the hellish Nigeria that holds no hope for the future. They think he is insane to leave God's own country (37). Concerning this decision, Dr. Mukoro asks him "Do you know what you are doing to yourself?" (34). On their part, his kinsmen tell him "we are proud of you over there more than your being here ... Go back and help us from there" (43-45). But none of these would make him change his mind as he is determination to confront the powers that have continually impoverished and dispossessed his people of their God-given riches. He is rather more concerned about how to heal his community of its devastation as a result of oil exploration. The Activist is pained that for the many years of degradation of their environment, the oil companies have failed to pay compensation to the impoverished people of his community. Still determined to make a positive impact in the lives of his people, he now spends more time preaching resistance to the

exploiters and the retrieval of his people's once unpolluted environment. While on a boat picnic with Ebi, he decries the impending environmental disaster as a result of the activities of the multinational oil companies. He declares:

We are in for a disaster. If nothing is done to save our waters, land and air ... our people watch their water turn to poison, their land become crust from blow outs and the air become hot from poisonous gas ... (86).

Still concerned about the devastation of his homeland and his people, The Activist decries the health challenges of epidemics of dysentery and worm diseases caused by oil exploration activities. He also regrets the transformation of their water that used to be a healthy elixir into a poisonous brew. It is his consciousness of the foregoing and his desire for a better existential condition for his people that spurs him into sensitizing and raising the consciousness of his students on the need to shun anti-social activities and pursue altruistic interest that will collectively liberate them from deprivation and dispossession. He tells them:

The young must dream big so that they could achieve the seemingly impossible. There is no neutral ground. Either you are on one side or the other ... why should corruption gulp four –fifths of the national revenue rather than education, health or transportation that could benefit all the citizens of the country ... things should not remain the same (152-153).

He goes further to radicalize his students and other people on the urgent need to resist exploitation by Bell oil company and their government collaborators. Soon, this Activist character wins over the student union leadership to his side and they begin to have open confrontations with agents of the powers that hold them down. The height of this confrontation is the murder of Bell oil's community development officer Professor Tobore Ede for daring to accuse them of blowout sabotage. Apart from the students, the activist strikes a rhythm with Pere who is the leader of the area boys. It is with Pere that he ventures into illegal oil bunkering and distribution as an avenue of raising funds to resist the

exploiters of his people. Before the end of the narrative, he moves from activism to becoming the governor of his Niger Delta State. But to his dismay, on the attainment of this height, he soon realizes that as a governor, he lacks the absolute power to proffer the much desired solution to the challenges of his devastated environment.

Pere, the leader of the Area Boys is another character who is conscious of the need to wrestle their community and her resources from the hands of their exploiters. He champions the local cause of holding Bell Oil Company and the federal military government accountable for their wrong doing in the Niger Delta region. For this cause, he is detained for seven years. But he comes out stronger and more determined to continue his advocacy. Contrary to the general negative impression about the area boys, the narrator tells us that “The area boys were not mindless robbers, but hardened locals who felt they had to share in whatever they could from the economic life of their communities (50). Prior to this, Pere was expelled in his second year in the Grammar school for violence against a fellow student. This is followed by his mother’s demise which leaves him to struggle for survival. Meanwhile, it is obvious to Pere and his gang of area boys that the oil companies do not engage the natives to work for them. They also know that the academics and chiefs who should come to their rescue are more interested in lining their individual pockets with bribe money from their exploiters. Thus, their restiveness is for the general well-being of the people of their community. The major concern of these boys is to compel the oil companies to compensate their people for their environment and means of livelihood destroyed by oil exploration activities. It is against this backdrop that the narrator tells us:

The area boys knew that charity in the form of titbits thrown about to a desperate crowd should not take the place of justice and fairness. They also wanted the oil companies to return a fraction of their profit to restore the environment that had been devastated by various forms of pollution (67).

To the Area boys, the Bell Oil company stole their wealth and used it to develop their own country and left them impoverished with a seriously polluted environment. They blame them for the endless oil spillage,

blowouts and gas flares. They further accuse the multinational oil companies of polluting their farmlands and rivers leaving them hungry and angry. Thus, these area boys, engage in all sorts of antisocial activities for survival, including kidnapping of white expatriates and collecting heavy ransom from them. Pere and his group of dispossessed youth are further described as:

fighters attempting not only to reclaim what had been robbed from them, but also holding firmly to what was theirs that others are attempting to snatch from them. They saw no contradiction in robbing those who have robbed them (48).

Besides his leadership of the area boys, Pere also partners with the Activist in illegal bunkering and the establishment of The Delta Cartel's petrol station.

Chief Tobi Ishakais another character who is conscious of the predicament of his community and takes conscious steps in enthroning common good. He bemoans the lack of basic amenities in his community where the money used to develop capitals of Lagos and Abuja come from. He reveals that his community lacks such essential amenities as post office, a maternity and well-equipped schools. He is unhappy with the fact that young people from his Niger Delta community are unemployed, while outsiders occupy major positions in the oil companies. He is pained by the Chiefs' wrangling for oil money given to them by the big companies whose activities threaten their very existence in their native homeland. For instance, at the council of chiefs' meeting, Chief Tobi Ishaka railed at his fellow chiefs who compromise the common good for selfish desires. He expresses his disappointment in them for being economical with the truth and embracing lies from their exploiters thus:

When have elders become afraid of telling the truth? The white robe of chieftaincy and the coral beads we wear set us apart. But we seem not to know our responsibilities. We are supposed to be the clean ones, but I'm afraid we even stink (111).

As an honorable man, Chief Ishaka works hard to make money with which he maintains his family and pays the school fees of all his five children. He perceives Bell and O & G Oil companies as their community's common foes. It is this forthrightness and the desire for collective emancipation from his community's common enemies that makes him shun the frequent bribery in form of gifts by the oil companies to his fellow chiefs. He refuses to share in the big payoff envelopes occasionally given to his fellow traditional title holders. He decries the fact that through this bribery, the oil companies take away their collective wealth as a community and leave them with crumbs to quarrel over. He maintains that "his people are being short-changed in the oil wealth" (112).

Apart from *The Activist*, Pere and Chief Ishaka, other characters who are conscious of the need for a common front to confront their enemies are some female characters in the narrative. They include Ebi Omasheye, Mrs. Taylor and the nude women protesters. While Mrs. Taylor is elected president of Women of Niger Delta Forum (WADEFOR), Ebi Omasheye is the secretary of the association. The women who constitute this group are unhappy about the exploitation and degradation of their environment by the Bell Oil company and the military government. Their major preoccupation is to get the oil companies to change their attitudes towards their host communities. They commenced this quest by proposing an interactive session with the exploiters. When this fails, they plan the unconventional way of nude protest to compel the exploiters comply. This plan to stage a nude protest is however aborted. This is because the government gets wind of it and deploys its security personnel to quell it. Concerning this, the omniscient narrator tells us:

The world was denied of the spectacle of a naked parade of old women before the oil terminal and the nearby flow station. Mask wearing Navy personnel with the assistance of retired marines overwhelmed the island with tear gas and a type of gas nobody knew its name but it made people dizzy and mindless. Every exposed person was dazed and the women became drowsy and sleepy. A few women were raped in their drowsy states in the boats (215-216).

Not minding these unfortunate experiences of WADEFOR women in the hands of these security personnel, they still vow to continue the struggle. They declare “Let those who assaulted us know the crime they have committed. We cannot sit and watch our land made unlivable by outsiders.(216). This resolution is reiterated in the post protest speech by the WODEFOR’s president. In this speech she emphasizes that the women of the Niger Delta would not give up their struggle until positive changes come. She further invokes the patron goddess of women to avenge the rape, and humiliation suffered by the women during the protest (218).

On the other side of the divide are Chief Dogho, Tebele, Fatakpa and Okiti. These four chiefs may best be described as corrupt, self-centered and receivers of bribes. They enjoy benefit from the insensitive oil companies and abuse Chief Ishaka for not partaking in short changing other members of their community. Furthermore, through this narrative, Ojaide indicts the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region, and the military regime of General Mustapha, Ali Dongo for the displacement of the locals. The narrator accuses them as follows:

In the company’s inordinate hunger for more barrels of oil to ship out to increase yearly record profits, the landscape was gradually turning into a wasteland. Residents of the oil producing areas had become restless before the monstrous power of their overlords, the oil company and the Military Government (46).

As the narrative races to an end, we are given a glimpse of hope for the suffering people of this devastated region. The people’s frustrations are avenged through the quick annihilation of the major exploiters of the locals. The managing Director of Bell Oil, Mr. Van Hoortsuffers a heart attack and dies. This is followed by the announcement of the death of the head of the Federal Military Government, General Mustapha Ali Dongo, under weird circumstances. To the humiliated nude protesters, it means that the aim of the aborted strip protest has been achieved.

It is equally obvious that the security apparatus, particularly the soldiers, police and the naval personnel belong to the group of characters who are not conscious of the need for sacrifices in order to end the predicament of the people of the environmentally devastated community.

Here, they act as tools of torture, rape and oppression of the people of the Niger Delta region. The narrator indicts them thus “They received money to keep away from crime scenes; they could do worse things for the sake of money” (121). He further describes them with the imagery of goats used to guard cassava leaves (122).

Conclusion

Hinged on Homi Bhabha’s insistence in *DissemiNation* that nations emerge from their narrative discourses (1990:1), we have argued that the unfortunate experiences of the people of the environmentally degraded communities in the Niger Delta Region authenticate the claim that the residual effects of colonialism still linger with us in Africa. The characteristic colonial dispossession and degradation of the less powerful people in former colonies still exist in our contemporary world. The former colonial masters now collaborate with selfish locals to short change the people of their rights and entitlements in these regions. It is this predicament as it affects his people of the Niger Delta region that Tanure Ojaide sets out to narrate in *The Activist*. In order to appropriately convey this subject matter, the novel is populated with characters whose actions, thoughts and voices depict the challenges of the people of his region. This is against the backdrop of the devastation of their environment through the activities of the oil companies who are protected by the military government. Apart from the portrayal of authentic characters, the author also engages the use of metaphor and verifiable settings.

Metaphorically, the protagonist who has no given name represents all men and women who have in one way or the other confronted those responsible for the devastation of their ancestral land, to reflect those who have historically propagated the cause of the people of the Niger Delta region, including the likes of Saro Wiwa, Asare Dokubo and the members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Still on metaphor one may not be wrong to equate the real life SPDC (Shell Petroleum Development Company) with Ojaide’s Bell Oil. Apart from the fact that this fictional “BELL” oil company rhymes with the real life “SHELL”, the narrator describes the emblem as same with the real life oil company thus: “the company’s emblem of a red rimmed shell of yellow flames” (46).

In terms of setting, such verifiable places in the Niger Delta region including Warri, Effurun, Port Harcourt and the Niger Delta University are used to authenticate the narrative. For language and diction, the author alternates between English language and Pidgin English in order to authenticate the voices of his characters, depending on their positions in the social and academic ladder. It is evident that these techniques are combined to project a realistic picture of the predicaments of the dispossessed people of his Niger Delta region. These, no doubt are intentionally deployed to raise consciousness on the urgent need for the much desired positive change in the region.

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