

SLOW VIOLENCE AND THE POLITICS OF ALIENATION IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE ACTIVIST*

Uchenna Ohagwam¹ & Tambari Dick²

¹Department of English & Literature, Rivers State University

²Department of English Studies, University of Port Harcourt

Abstract

Alienation is a theoretical concept developed by Karl Marx, which describes the isolating, disenchanting, dehumanizing effects of working within a capitalist arrangement. It occurs when an individual or a community, feels one-self alone, estranged or isolated from what is either theirs or their common good. The feeling of alienation is at the base of varying forms of unfriendly, unsympathetic or hostile atmosphere that have become the bane of many communities in the Niger Delta region. Often, alienation is triggered by either a socio-political setup or largely due to capitalist surroundings. For some thinkers, this estranged situation is strictly psychological, but for Marxists, it is a material and social process whereby there is a separation or detachment of beings or things that are or have been naturally united together. Thus, the study is anchored on the assumption that as people are separated from what brings them together with nature and their roots, the environment will not only witness political threats, but also an overwhelming rate of ecological ruins that are slow and attritional.

Key Words: Estrangement, environment, activist, slow violence, losses

Introduction

Tanure Ojaide falls into the category of Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan. This group of writers can best be referred to as the second generation of modern Nigerian writers. His creative excellence is both significant and indisputably unparalleled; having published numerous collections of poetry, short stories, critical works and novels which include, *The Activist*. Published in 2006 by Farafina Publishers, *The Activist* is not just concerned with exploring the problems associated with environmental ruins in the Niger Delta, it also confronts some colonial leftovers and neo-colonial practices which have become the bane of Africa's development. In the blurb of the novel, Dike Okoro drops this remark about the narrative:

The Activist is a monumental literary achievement. The protagonist, clearly a symbol of the patriotic and visionary Nigeria, 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 truly riveting and starting tale enriched with colourful and highly sophisticated writing.

Ojaide's *The Activist* is indeed a political novel; however, we cannot displace nor deny its eco-critical stance. The novel features elements of post-independence disillusionment, ethnic marginalization, oil-politics, ecological dissonance and intellectual activism.

The protagonist of the story, who goes by the name, the Activist (the same title with the novel) is a son of the Niger Delta region who had just returned to his fatherland after living in the United States for twenty-five years. The activist had obtained his first, second and Ph.D. degrees from the States too, but became dissatisfied with living abroad. Hence, he returns home to take up an employment as a university lecturer at the Niger Delta State University. No sooner has he assumed his duties in Nigeria as a university teacher, than he becomes disenchanted with the attitude of the Nigerian political leadership style when placed in parallel with the living conditions of citizens. Added to this, he discovers that the problem of the Niger Delta people is two dimensional: environmental despoliation of the region on one hand and the intentional impoverishment of the people of that region. Following this, he enlists himself in the legitimate efforts at redeeming the environment and joins in negotiating better living conditions for his people. Through a conscious

deployment of his intellectual arsenals, patriotism and transformational vision, the Activist agrees to the fact that change is achievable through genuine transformation in the dynamics of political power and the engagement of intellectual activism.

From his role as a university teacher, an intellectual activist and a gubernatorial candidate, the Activist demonstrates that leadership is winning influence over people by meeting their goals and needs. His activities align with the truth that when a country or state is not doing well, you do not change the followers, but you seek to change the leaders. Aside, being an intellectual from the Niger Delta region, the Activist is also one of the governorship hopefuls in the coming elections; but what makes him stand out among others is that he exhibits exceptional qualities and the people can visibly see in him their dreams and aspirations for the better life. One of the rules of leadership states that no one has the right to ask people to follow him if he has no journey to take. His leadership style is a direct contrast to such leaders as Dr. Biribo Mukoro and Professor Tobore, whose actions can be summed as betrayal of the people. In one of his electioneering campaign speeches, the Activist demonstrates how the intertwining of language and power can mobilize people for change:

“All I care for is Niger Delta State. I want us to have our soil, water, and air as healthy as it used to be. We have to douse the fires that threaten our existence. If you give me your votes, I will ask the oil companies to clean our creeks, streams and rivers so that the fish population can return to our waters. My government will provide boats to travel about in the riverine areas. We have the resources to help ourselves live better than we now live in the area” he told his listeners to loud shouts of support
(*The Activist* p. 341).

With the above, it becomes easy to comprehend Udumukwu's (2006) position that:

Power, especially political power, is an essential thread in the desire for change. This is because power

can either mar a people's aspiration for change or even bring change to realization. In either case, language is an important weapon through which power crystallizes itself (*The Novel and Change* p. 194).

Through his manifesto, particularly his appropriate engagement of language and ideas, the Activist's campaign manifesto “drowned the other eleven candidates' voices, comfortably won the governorship race and became the first elected governor of the state in all its history” (*The Activist* p. 343).

After churning out volumes of anthologies of poetry, Tanure Ojaide felt compelled to engage the prose genre in order to incontrovertibly articulate the living conditions of the marginalized people of Niger Delta and the gory state of environmental neglect which bedevils the region. *The Activist* is peculiar as a work of art which champions the cause of the exploited in the society through literary activism and revolutionary aesthetics. This therefore resonates Ngugi wa Thiong'o's submission that “every work of literature is a commitment to a special political ideology, and every writer is a writer in politics” (*Writers in politics*, p. xii). As its fictionality, *The Activist* is one of such true-to-life narratives in that most places and organization mentioned in the novel like Abuja, Itsekiri, Ughelli, OPEC, CLO and a few other circumstances captured and expressed in the story, bear semblance with some realities in Nigeria. Furthermore, *The Activist* demonstrates Ojaide's acute sense of social responsibility which manifests not only in the underlying content of his work, but more importantly, it lies in his skilful handling of the form of narrative in order to communicate socio-political and ecological realities.

Politics, Activism and Alienation

The horrid conditions of Nigerian civil war produced the civil war literature, the refusal to grant women some rights that were held back by patriarchy, gave birth to what we refer to as women's literature, and the enormity of ecological ruins and the marginalization in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have influenced the emergence of Niger Delta literature.

The Activist is Ojaide's fictional attempt,

through his intellectual protagonist, to examine and decry such woes as political leadership ineptitude, economic marginalization, environmental destruction and social injustices meted out to the indigenes of oil-bearing communities—their lives, their flora and fauna inclusive. The gradual ruin of a system which reminds us of Rob Nixon’s idea of slow or attrition violence, is perpetrated by a three-fold “cabal” in the region. They include, the political class (the government of the day), the multinational oil prospecting corporations and some self-seeking Niger Deltans whom Ojaide had grouped as “treacherous insiders” (*The Activist* p. 120).

Politics and activism are at the heart of this novel. The Activist, in the spirit of a revolutionary fanonian hero embarks on the task of firstly, as Frantz Fanon suggested: “educate the masses politically and secondly, ensure that the totality of the nation becomes a reality to each citizen, and thirdly, make the history of the nation part of the personal experiences of each citizen” (*The Wretched* p. 161). Like Chinua Achebe, the Activist begins his assignment with “teaching his people that their past with all its imperfections” can be redeemed. (“The Novelist as Teacher” p. 45).

With the assistance of his friends, the Activist arouses the consciousness of both old and young to the realities of lack, privation, the grinding poverty in the midst of abundance, the situation where a person living on the bank of a river can only wash his hands with his spittle, the stark reality of people who live on the farm, yet die of famine, the environmental degradation to which people of Niger Delta are subjected to by those at the head of the movement—that is those who in Fanon’s elocution, have chosen to continuously “voodoo the people and dissolve them in emotion and confusion” (*The Wretched* p. 161). For the Activist, everyone who is a direct or an indirect victim of a leadership characterized by confusion are exposed to a form of violence. In an exploitative social space, the economy is key in determining almost every relationship; hence political or economic actors who are determined to bring about change, often subscribe to political revolution or activism as an effective means of bringing about transformation.

Another form of slow violence which many indigenous youths frowned at; indeed, it ignited their protests and demonstrations is the despoiling of their physical environment and their continued impoverishment. This is how the narrator puts it: “To the area buys, Bell Oil Company stole their wealth to develop its owner’s countries overseas and left them impoverished” (*The Activist* p. 77). Clearly, this is an example of estrangement or alienation. For Marxists, estrangement is sponsored by amongst other things, when people live in a class-based, class-conscious ranking or stratified society. In a capitalist society, we can boldly say that the worker is in the lower or middle class, while the employer of labour is in the upper class. In addition, the workers have no control over their product of labour and on the labour itself, which is their life activity. Consequently, they are estranged from it and become victims of alienation.

There are various forms of alienation as that manifest in Ojaide’s *The Activist*, but one stands out; it is powerlessness alienation. By powerlessness alienation, we refer to a feeling of being powerless in a society that creates alienation. When a person wants to bring about change that would benefit everyone, but feels incapable and powerless in doing this or actualizing his vision, owing to resisting powers, a feeling of alienation sets in. This is the condition the Activist met his people in on his return from the United States of America, after living there for twenty-five years. Just a few months after his return, he is greeted with the dehumanizing and deplorable conditions in which his people are made to live with by the tripartite—enemy of the Niger Delta region: the government of Nigeria, the directors of the oil multinational corporations and selfish indigenes of the region. Of course, at the base of it all, is the mismanagement of the people’s resources and their alienation from the control of their natural endowment.

This condition, therefore, triggers deep emotional and psychological agony in the Activist. While more money accrues to the government, the oil prospecting companies and their indigenous cohorts in various Niger Delta communities, the mass of the people are confronted with lots of

socio-economic issues ranging from loss of farmlands, loss of farm produce, extreme poverty and worse still, estrangement. This contradiction, according to Frantz Fanon is the situation where "...the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty" (p.138).

Worse still, to cover up the practice of estranging or separating the people from their common wealth, the oil companies engage the services of a few indigenes like Professor Ede, whose primary assignment is to effectively use rhetoric, persuasion and double-speaking to deceive and numb the people from questioning their ugly living conditions. Specifically, what the likes of Professor Ede does is to "voodoo the people by dissolving them in emotion and confusion" (*The Wretched* p. 161) on behalf of Bell Oil Company. Following this, Professor Ede, though an indigene of the region, becomes emblematic of the group of natives referred by Niyi Osundare as "native executheives holding forth for alien wolves" (*The Eye of the Earth*, p. 46) or what Ojaide calls, "treacherous insiders" (*The Activist*, p. 120). With these and many more, the Activist soon discovered that the Niger Delta had a new face, indeed, an ugly face that was different from the pristine one he used to know. The signs were already there before he left, but the disfiguration then was child's play compared to how it is twenty-five years after. He had returned to be greeted with the emergence of a destructive hurricane as far as the environment and the real owners were concerned.

As if the above was not enough, this same multinational corporation has continued to advance the frontiers of her oppressive tendencies on the people on whose soil their oil exploration activities are carried out. Added to the above, Bell oil company was also secretly training foreign retired uniform men who would be deployed into the Niger Delta with the responsibility of protecting oil installations – a job or contract which should be awarded to indigenous youths. By leaving these able-bodied young people unemployed or unengaged, these youths will be tempted to take to crime and criminality like those creeks; thereby leaving the region with that image of a war zone:

Where the area boys got guns from

and kept them, the public did not know but they had more sophisticated weapons than the police and soldiers did. They possessed AK 47s, magnums, 50 calibre rifles, and all sorts of powerful guns. The many factions fought against each other fierce battles that brought the civil war battles of Abagana and Ehor to mind. Once they engaged themselves in combat, civilians in long trails left town in a manner also reminiscent of civil war day (*The Activist* p. 81).

In his award-winning book, *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor* (2011), Rob Nixon submitted that slow violence is a form of violence which occurs gradually, often not noticed ("out of sight"), a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space (Nixon, p. 2). Gunning running is a form of violence of postponed consequences. The long-term effects are worrisome for any society. A study carried out by the Global Observatory of Transnational Criminal Network (GOTCN) in 2014, but published in 2017 had the following revelations: trafficking of firearms is a significant issue in Africa, and that the countries where the traffic of fire arms take place share the common characteristics of experiencing high levels of unemployment and poverty, low human development level, income inequality and systemic corruption. Also, these territories are or recently were involved in armed conflicts, and usually have a strong presence of gang and organized crime that demand guns to perform criminal activities (*Global Observatory...* p. 5). Social issues like unemployment and poverty are the breeding ground for the proliferation of arms, but beyond that, ecological troubles like oil slicks, blowouts, gas flares have resulted in huge damages on both human and non-human nature in the region. Pere, a partner with the Activist, decries these social problems, which in his assessment are manifestations or examples of slow violence:

If we cannot live on our water, land, and air, then we are finished...the air used to be cool because of constant

rain and the luxuriant forest, but oil slicks, blowouts, and gas flares had destroyed that life. Even the rain that fell was soot-black that no more did anybody drink rainwater, which of all waters, used to be described as God-given water. The people had lost their green refuge as well. Their forests used to have deep green and lush foliage, the pride of the tropics, but that had changed, since fires often followed oil and gas accidents (*The Activist* p. 82).

As a social crusader, the Activist believes that the already known problems of the Niger Delta should serve as catalyst for new problem-solving ideas: And if these issues are not promptly addressed, if radical changes are not carried out, there will be no environment for the next generation:

Things have changed so drastically that we might lose everything we knew from our youth in just a few years to come...the oil companies are discovering more oil onshore and offshore. We are in for disaster, if nothing is done to save our waters, land and air (*The Activist* p. 103).

Following this, we can obviously identify the Activist's prompt and radical approach to change the order of things if given the opportunity. His concerns and those expressed by other well-meaning indigenes of the region are primarily centred on the selfish approach of the oil multinationals who have secured operating license from a government that is indifferent to the livelihood of the people.

Another concern of the Activist and those who share same train of thought with him, is the rapid loss of subsistent economy of the Niger Delta people. Writing on nature and the importance of subsistent economy, Stephen Ekpenyong (2003) observed that it is wrong to describe Third World economic system as being largely subsistent when trying to compare productive systems of the world. This creates the impression that only in the Third World did subsistence economy exist at some point in history, whereas the economies of all nations

began with subsistence behaviour but changed over time. All societies had at one time or the other depended entirely on subsistence production as production was geared toward the satisfaction of primary and basic needs (p. 291).

Ekpenyong (2003) further enumerated three types of subsistent economy or the major activities in subsistent economic production:

- subsistent economy that is based on hunting of wild animals and gathering of fruits, vegetables and roots.
- Subsistent economy based on the domestication of animals
- Subsistent economy based on the cultivation of crops

As this primary means of economic growth is slowly being wiped out through oil spills, blowouts, soot and other hazards, the economy and the environment of the people will become worse for it. It is this two-sided loses or what Dike Okoro (2007) described as "the irony of oil exploitation in modern Nigeria", that aroused in the Activist and a few others, the urgent need to change the living standards of his impoverished Niger Delta community through whatever legitimate means available to him.

The involvement of professors and other university academic staff members in acts of espionage, exploitation, violence and double standards in order to get monetary benefits from some oil multinational corporations even at the detriment of poor community dwellers, is yet another form of "attritional" violence with future negative consequences. Prior to Roko fire outbreak, the community dwellers made a decision to protest following a blowout which took place, not excluding oil pipelines which crisscrossed the entire community as well as the health dangers involved, but when the multinationals got a wind of an upcoming protest, they delegated Professor Kokoba, who also is an indigene of that community to lie to his people that there was no cause for panic, and that they were safe. These pipes crossed playgrounds for children, cassava farms of women and many parts of the village. Even after one of their own, Professor Kokoba, has been hired to lie to them, the narrator tells us that, "The villagers doubted they were safe but there

was nothing they could do after their own son had assured them that they were safe” (*The Activist* p. 192).

Corruption and betrayal are two striking themes that characterize Ojaide’s *The Activist*. But beyond that, the shameless boldness with which some members of the intellectual class get caught in the cesspool of corruption, they even advance the frontiers of corruption through their complicity in oil-politics and their naked indifference towards the welfare of the poor masses are clearly worrisome.

Tanure Ojaide and the vision of remediation in *The Activist*

Tanure Ojaide is reputed for not only a poet and a novelist, but also as a cultural historian and a social critic. For him, a writer should have the competencies of a social critic, one of which must be the eagle’s vision, a writer can ferret out social ills of his society, condemn them and intentional chart a healthy course for the well-being of all.

In *The Activist*, through his intellectual hero, who also doubles as the protagonist, Ojaide underscores the magnitude of social and ecological injustices meted out to communities in the Niger Delta region by the combined forces of the government, the multinationals and some treacherous indigenes of the region. For Ojaide, these injustices must be put to an end through strong resistance and sustained revolutionary activities. Although he negotiates dialogue at some points but emphasized strong resistance if concrete change is in view. Furthermore, Ojaide argues that any wrong thing you watch and do nothing about, will remain as it is, and that when wrong things, wrong actions, wrong practices are left to change with time, they truly do not change with time, but get worse with time.

To protest injustice is the foundation for social change, and it is better to protest than to accept injustice. Through the protests, demonstrations and rallying slogans of the area boys, we can identify some of the demands—which are legitimate and germane to the developmental yearnings of many exploited communities in the region. Put in other words, their demands can best be summed up as the writer’s vision of remediation. One striking

demand on their list is that “multinational oil companies should return a fraction of their profit to restore the environment which has been devastated by various forms of pollution” (*The Activist* p. 79).

Another vision of remediation submitted by the novelist is the inclusion of local content. It is conceived from the idea that globalization in the oil industries will be incomplete without the involvement of “multicultural personnel” (*The Activist* p. 181), hence granting Dennis, Chief Ishaka’s son employment in Bell oil company, after the young man had earned a first class degree in petroleum engineering from the University of Lagos. This is local content involvement.

Ojaide vision focuses its searchlight on the dangers of peddling lies, using tricks and abusing the sensibilities of host communities by oil corporations operating in the area. Indeed, such actions and practices can undermine the cordial relationship that should exist between the oil companies and their host communities. In the scene where Bell oil company’s community development officer, Professor Tobore Ede made a visit to the university campus primarily to address protesting students, the narrator tells us that he turned abusive in his choice of words and this triggered the students. His opening sentences were direct insults on the community dwellers, who are supposedly the parents of these students. In his words:

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

It is said that violence begets violence; also, he who comes to equity, must come to clean hands. No doubt professor Ede’s remark is laced with violence and it attracted a violent response from the angry students who spared no time in setting

him and his vehicle ablaze.

Another vision of remediation which Ojaide expressed in this novel, is the usefulness of dialogue and quality consultation as means of conflict resolution and decision making. One of the oldest and acceptable means of resolving conflicts among warring factions or group is dialogue. Through the actions of such characters like Mrs. Timi Taylor and Ebi—the wife of the Activist, women of several occupations ranging from “women farmers, fishers, traders, priestesses, chiefs, lawyers, lecturers, doctors were all summoned” (*The Activist* p. 237), under the umbrella name, Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR). Their aim was “to seek permanent peace” in the area following rising spate of violence and the wanton destruction of lives and property fuelled by oil-politics in the region. In their deliberations, they identified “a litany of woes that the Niger Delta women were suffering from” (*The Activist* p. 240), an aftermath of the discovery of oil in the region. They also deliberated on ways of reducing pollution in the environment and making the ecosystem safe for

both human and non-human nature.

In addition to the above communique, the women group demanded that “the oil multinational companies should spend a fraction of their wealth to restore the already damaged environment” (*The Activist* p. 243).

Conclusion

Essentially, change happens by listening and then starting a dialogue with the people who are doing something you do not think is right. A complete clean-up of the environment is unarguably possible. We can become the change agents—whether as multinationals, government representatives or indigenous insiders, if we truly want to. Basically, for whichever form alienation manifests, it still does not make it a sweet experience neither does it change it inherently. All forms of alienation, in reality, are different aspects of human being’s estrangement from his own “essential nature”. This is largely responsible for the rising spate of different variations of social ills, crisis and tension that have impeded what would have been a safe, secured and developed Niger Delta region.

References

- Achebe, C. (1975). “The novelist as teacher”. *Morning yet on creation day*. London: Heinemann.
- Callinicos, A. (2004). *The revolutionary ideas of Karl Marx*. Sydney: The Bookmark Publications
- Carver, T. (ed.), (1999). *The Cambridge companion to Marx*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ekpenyong, S. (2003). *Elements of sociology*. Port Harcourt: Heritage Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *The wretched of the earth*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Ohagwam, U. (2018). The Niger Delta crises in the Niger Delta Novel: Reflections on Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*” *Journal of Arts & Humanities* 7 (11): pp.6-14 Retrieved from <http://theartsjournal.org>
- Okoro, D. (2007). “Courage under fire in the motherland”. In *Litnet*. Retrieved from <http://www.co.za/courage-under-fire-in-motherland>.
- Ojaide, T. (2006). *The activist*. Victoria Island: Farafina.
- Udumukwu, O. (2006). *The novel and change in Africa*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.