

Gender, Health and Socio-Political Issues in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

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Abstract

For many years, gender issues have continued to dominate discourses locally and globally. It is therefore heart-warming to note that women are providing leadership not only at home but in other spheres of life, be it economic, social or political. The exploration and exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta region has resulted in untold hardship, eco-trauma, bio-terrorism and the general neglect of the area. The debacle associated with oil exploration has affected the people and denied them their traditional occupations. Women are not left out and are confronted with new challenges of violence, health and political issues metted on them by the federal government of Nigeria in collaboration with multi-national oil companies, the army, navy and the police. Lives and properties are lost to gas flares, blow out from oil spillage, environmental pollution etc. Meanwhile, the federal government and multi-nationals grow fat at the expense of the poor. Oil capitalism has brought sorrow and doom to the region, as the Niger Delta remains under-developed. Ojaide's thematic preoccupation in *The Activist* is to throw more light on the plight of the Niger Delta people especially the women who face various forms of victimizations like rape, miscarriages, occupational disempowerment, pollution, lose of eyesight and other health hazards. This paper seeks to highlight the role of these women who refuse to be seen as docile and second class as well as their socio-political activism in reversing their predicament. Three theories inform the focus of the paper through it's characters representation namely; eco-feminism, feminism and the Marxism theories as the women and the masses fought the oil workers and their cohorts to a halt to gain full control of the companies and become employers of labour in the once ravaged, impoverished environment by oil companies. The paper is based on library research.

187

Keywords

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Preamble

Before the advent of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the ecosystem was pure and natural. Everdren opines that “nature is real and constitutes the standard against which the laws of all nations must be judged and to which they ought to conform” (Agar, 2006). The Niger Delta people lived peacefully, savoring the green environment characterized by clean water for farming/domestic use, fishing and fertile land for agriculture, thick forest for hunting animals and games among others. Atemie and Akikibofori opine that by engaging in the same activities and rituals, people of traditional societies share common moral values that Durkheim called “collective conscience. In traditional societies people tend to regard themselves as members of a group. The collective conscience embraces individual awareness, there is little sense of personal options” (Apter, 1998). The region is densely populated and one of the world’s greatest ecosystems with mangrove forest found everywhere. The discovery of oil in the region was supposed to bring wealth, job opportunities, infrastructural development, social amenities etc to the people of the region. Yet man in his greed and quest for materialism has disturbed the order of nature. The “eco-peace” to borrow Onyema’s expression (Apter, 1998) has suffered setbacks. The palliatives the Niger Delta people were suppose to have, have always eluded them. Instead, they are subjected to hardship, suffering, marginalization, starvation, health hazards among others. Onyema argues that “rather than deep indulgence in the praise song school of romantic green, the Niger Delta writers praise nature as nostalgic memorization that instills a psychological throw out to the eco-harmony that prevailed in the pre-crude Delta, in order to give fillip to the degree of loss, devastation and suffering spilled by crude oil exploration. People pay for eco-devastation with their lives” (Habila, 1992).

Lending credence to the above claim, writers like Helon Habila, Kaine Agary, Isidore Okpewho, Tess Onwueme etc have lamented the negative impact of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region. The region is plagued by vast degradation, pollution, destruction of farming and aquatic life, which has further impoverished the people. Many Niger Deltans have lost their sources of livelihood. This has led to rise in criminal activities like oil pipe vandalization, kidnapping, militancy, prostitution, armed robbery among others. While the federal government and multi-national oil companies wax stronger and richer, the region is fast becoming a ghost of its former self. Apter states that “the multi-nationals/federal government were engaged in lootcraft-stealing from the poor and giving to the rich” (Habila, 1992).

The federal government/multi-national oil companies are insensitive and mindless to the plight of the people. They eschew corporate social responsibilities, turning deaf ears to the plight of the people. As the natural green and fecundity of the ecosystem disappears, the Niger Deltans are faced with new realities and seek alternative ways of survival in a hitherto eco-violent environment where extortioners enjoy immunity.

Women, Health and Socio – political issues in Ojaide's *The Activist*

Ojaide’s novel, *The Activist* explores Ken Saro – Wiwa’s concern for his people and his region. Saro Wiwa was one of the greatest activist/environmentalist in the Niger Delta. Daminabo recalls that Saro – Wiwa did not fight for his Ogoni people alone. What he did was to use Ogoni as a metaphor for the entire minority ethnic nations of Nigeria. He successfully launched a non violent approach in tackling ecological issues in the Niger Delta. Saro-Wiwa’s attack was global, starting from Port Harcourt, Lagos, London Geneva, Vienna and both Rotterdam and The Hague. He also used major organizations like the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), European Economic Commission (EEC), the Commonwealth Secretariat,

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), International (World) Court of Justice (ICJ) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) as well as influential media outfits like the BBC, VOA, CNN among others.

The novel situates itself within the socio-economic political discourse of injustice and eco-trauma witnessed by the people of the region. The title of the novel foregrounds the author's ideological stance concerning the plight of his people. Ojaide has written several collections of poetry which include *Labyrinths of the Delta*, *Delta Blues and Home songs*, *The Eagle's Vision*, *The Fate of Vultures*, and *other Poems and The Blood of Peace*. Darah opines that what is discernible in Ojaide's poetry is “an abiding concern with the fate of the Niger Delta people” (Calhoun, 1997). Ojaide's novel include *Stars of the Long Night* which celebrate the Niger Delta of yore, of great men/women as well as their rich cultural heritage. *The Activist* takes a swipe into the socio-political and economic activities in the rich oil region “which celebrates young academia and freedom fighters who combine courage and intellect to advance the cause of popular resistance against exploitation by the federal government and its foreign collaborators” (Darah, 2010). These freedom fighters like Pere, Omagbemi, the area boys etc are like the MauMau in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*.

In *The Activist*, Ojaide probes into gender and health concerns which have continued to destroy communities in the Niger Delta. The police, army and naval marines unleash terror on the people instead of protecting them. Terrorism is a global issue that has continued to plague most countries today. Calhoun et al in *Sociology* define terrorism as simply “the spread of terror” (Daminabo, 2008). This definition is encapsulated in the Niger Delta experience and literary works. On the other hand, Schmid and Jongman view terrorism as a method of combat that includes a target of violence, a state of chronic fear and mobilization for target of demands or attention. They add that terrorism is often characterized by violence and threat targeted against civilians in-order to intimidate them. From this definition, it is evident that the Niger Delta people in *The Activist* are victims of terrorism perpetuated on them by the state (represented by the federal government) and secondly the multi-national oil companies like Bell Oil, O and G, in collaboration with some greedy and corrupt Niger Deltans.

The replacement of palm oil, which the region was noted for with crude oil changed the landscape bringing in its wake discontentment and greed. Teilanyo states that “the palm oil of the colonial era stands for the present day crude petroleum oil” (Daminabo, 2008). Money from oil wealth was used to develop Lagos and Abuja. Ojaide writes “... the oil boom turned into doom for the Niger Delta people. The proceeds from the oil went to Lagos to build a festival town for the black people of the world to celebrate their culture and arts and also to construct unending bridges to connect water-separated parts of the teeming city. Other oil gains also went to build an entire new capital on rocks in the windy and dusty savannah” (*The Activist*, 50). Corroborating the above claim, Darah asserts that “the stupendous growth of Lagos and Abuja, the state capitals, the highways and express ways, the airport, seaports, banks and finance houses is a direct consequences of the diversion of money from the Niger delta” (Daminabo, 2008).

Most farm lands became polluted and fishing became impossible Chief Tobi Ishaka, one of the prominent sons of the region birated his colleagues for greed and neglect of the region. He is upright and wants development in the region. Ojaide writes:

Tobi Ishaka had rejoiced when oil was first discovered in his farmland and family land. He had been to Lagos and seen its beauty in the skyscrapers and roads and had thought that the oil found in the area would be partly used to bring social amenities.

But that joy was short lived as he saw the national projects from oil taken away. He saw outsiders occupying all the key positions in the oil companies while most of their children remained unemployed (*The Activist*, 142)

Chief Ishaka's forthrightness calls to mind Chief Malabo in Habila's *Oil on Water*, who refused to sell his community land to multi-national oil companies. Chief Tobi Ishaka sends his son Dennis to study petroleum engineering, so that he will be able to drill oil in his family land. His son informs him thus:

That may not be possible father, because the federal military government has already sold the rights for prospecting oil on our land to the foreigners. They call it oil prospecting concession; I will not be able to drill oil in our own farmland, even if I had the knowledge, unless those concessions are revoked or re-assigned. 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 (*The Activist*, 143-144).

This is gross violation of human rights. In addition, the Niger Delta people faced bio-terrorism inform of blowouts e.g in Roko village, which was caused by old leaking pipes which "crossed playground of children, crossed cassava farms of women and even went through many parts of the village. Residential homes stood on both sides of pipelines" (*The Activist*, 154). This again is a clear example of insecurity of life and property which the people are subjected to. The oil companies bribe local chiefs and send the Community Development Officer, Professor Kokoba to reassure them of their safety. This is betrayal. This incident led to fire outbreak and destruction of the entire village. Ojaide records the deception, callousness and insensitivity of oil companies in the region. He recalls "they know that there was a blowout and the fire vehicle was stationed at the location less than twenty miles away. Rather they sat in their offices and issued a statement that the native population was sabotaging their pipelines" (*The Activist*, 155).

Raji argues that "... there is no other way to capture a situation where successive administrations remain unmoved even as their people experience incalculable damages resulting from environmental degradation and abuse if not as criminal neglect" (Stratton, 1994). It is against this backdrop that the area boys, led by Pere, in collaboration with the Activist, a returnee from the United States, now an academic in Delta State University and the student union of the university planned a protest which the oil company got wind of and sent Professor Tobere Ede, another Community Development Officer, to pacify the irate students. He blamed the fire on the people, whom he described as lazy, calling them names:

The villagers set their village on fire because they wanted to extort money from Bell Oil Company. People have become lazy and want an easy way to make money. None of those villages has a farm as they used to; none of them carries on fishing in waters proverbially rich with all kinds of fresh and salt water fish. The villagers just sit at home drinking illicit gin and playing draft and eko-games (*The Activist*, 156).

This insult was too much for the irate students, who saw him as a traitor and set him ablaze. Again, Atemie and Akikibofori aver that "youth restiveness completes a picture of socio-political anomie. The Niger Delta people are left out of the equation of governance and control in their own country because they are in the minority, the exploiters of their resources do not care about the people whose land had been left bare due to years of oil exploitation. The situation can be regarded as robbery of the minority" (Stratton, 1994). The Community Development Officer was replaced with a Community Liaison Officer from the military,

known as Colonel Sampson Dudu. He refused to help the displaced refugees of Roko. Nemesis caught up with him, as he died of stroke.

Oil violence/terrorism continued to affect the region. In Ekakpamre, the entire village was also destroyed. The poisonous gas destroyed wildlife and humans. The police/soldier drafted there again failed in their duties as they busied themselves looting homes of already traumatized victims. The people’s efforts to douse the fire failed, “they were black from the sooth of smoke and ashes. There were many premature births because some pregnant women went into sudden labour. Babies coughed relentlessly. The old wheezed. Eyes itched and those already with poor eyesight had their problems worsened by the fire and smoke” (*The Activist*, 207).

Again in the spirit of Marxism, Omagbemi mobilized the students and people against the multinational arsonists. They were able to suppress the mobile police that Bell Oil sent to secure their installations. They were more interested in securing their installations than saving lives. The students carried green leaves and tree branches to signify peace. Bell Oil, afraid of loosing sixteen million dollars daily, drafted soldiers to the area. The Egba boys, students and protesters were shot and wounded. This act of violence metted on innocent people by the military and the government’s denial of terrorism smacks of deceit, by a government that is supposed to protect its citizens from oppression. In addition, the federal government commended the police/army for brutalizing the people. Ojaide inundates his story with ironies and sarcasms and indicts the media for their complacency in covering evil in the oil rich region. Onyema agrees that “the poaching multinational companies with (the conniving Nigerian government) become as it was industrial capitalist that inevitably subdue pastoralism and pollute the natural habitats dizzy” (Stratton, 1994).

The wanton destruction of lives and property led to mourning in the affected community. Women left their hair unmade, while their male counterparts shaved their hair and sang dirges for their departed loved ones. These activities culminated in a nude protest by women of menopausal age, “this was in keeping with traditional practice of cursing the oppressors” (*The Activist*, 210). The nude protest by women marked the climax of violence in the region and underscores the women’s feminist spirit and female bonding. Emenyi (2005) cites Judith Bardwick who describes feminism as an implicit reflection of the lifestyle created by strong coercive norms that define and restrict what women are and can do...” (Ojaide,2010). Peter Okadike explains to his foreign boss that “women’s nude protest is the worst curse possible in the traditional society. It is a curse invoked when all measures to seek redress or justice had failed. And those cursed always died within days” (*The Activist*, 121). The above reiterates the fact that the female gender cannot be silenced forever. It is against similar backdrop that Stratton “castigates Achebe’s women for silence in the face of their oppression under Igbo patriarchy (and) express no opposition to the imposition of a regime which will add racial to further sexual oppression” (Ojaide,2010). Closely related to the nude dance is “the baring of the female buttocks” (Ojaide,2010) which Opara terms a typical female drama associated with some culture as a mark of vehement protest.

Timi Taylor, the president of women of the Niger Delta Forum, alongside Ebi (*The Activist’s* wife) become strong mobilizers of women in the region. Timi had ensured that journalists and reporters were on hand to cover the nude dance/protest but the women were tear-gased by naval marines and taken away. Brutalized and raped, the women refused to give up their struggle. Their doggedness is commendable. It calls to mind the women’s action in Sembene Ousmane’s *Gods Bits of Wood*. Kolawole submits that in *Gods Bits of Wood*, “women are at the vanguard of social struggle against racism, impoverishment and the male intimidation of

their men by the colonial bosses” (119). Titi called on the goddess of women, Umalokun to avenge the rape and humiliation of the women.

It is worthy of note that the above incident of rape is not the first in the region. The fishing net-project resulted in rape, killing, arson etc by drunken soldier’s. The soldiers “harassed people, extorted money, raped women, robbed and shot dead those who resisted the extortion and robbery and described them as saboteurs of peace” (*The Activist*, 186). Ojaide portrays the police/military as the real enemies of the people. They accepted bribes openly, sold their ammunitions to armed robbers and spent the money on alcohol and prostitutes, thus aiding the spread of HIV/Aids in the region. The health implication here is enormous for the whole community and Nigeria at large.

Oil exploration as mentioned earlier has adverse effect on the welfare of the Niger Deltans. Timi finds out that the women’s problems were linked to bio-terrorism. For instance, several women recounted their litany of woes, which include infertility in men and women, burning sensation, early menopause, spread of prostitution, early menstruation and pregnant women delivering malformed babies which some of them deliberately killed. One woman, known as Matije laments:

Your husband may look well but many of our men are now sick. Newly married young women complain about the weakness of their men; we older women see for ourselves what is happening. To be blunt about it, our husbands are losing their manhood at a very early age. How can old men be stronger than young men (*The Activist*, 191)

These women’s activism underscores Onyema’s assertion that “women move from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness. They are active in local/national politics and play complementary roles to the men, especially as it concerns organizing protest” (Ojaide,2010). In addition, Chukwuma submits that women from time immemorial have always been great mobilizers.

The Egba women’s march on the Alake of Egbaland by Mrs. Ransome Kuti was political and national. That move forced the Alake into exile. In 1929, the Aba women’s war which spread to Abak and its environs was to protest the taxation of their menfolk. These political marches and protests which in Abak cost about twenty-nine women their lives were completely national in objective... (105).

Bryce (2008) cites Nina Mba who posits that “the eastern women’s war was very much a feminist movement in the sense that the women were very conscious of the special role of women, the importance of women to society and the assertion of their rights as women vis-à-vis the men they consistently drew attention to their sexual identity through their dress, body gestures and songs (Saro, 1993).

Saro Wiwa according to Apter recounts with pride how the Ogoni people participated in the 1929 women’s tax riot in which several Ogoni women lost their lives. Their deaths attest to the Ogoni tradition of mobilization and resistance against foreign domination. Bryce is of the opinion that due to their protest, women were not taxed and were given a say in the election of warrant chiefs; considering also the further mass protests against taxation and other aspects of colonial rule in 1938 and throughout the 40s and 50s; in the 60s over education, in the 70s also when “there was swift government submission in Benin and Ibadan... when ... some market women, angered by the government’s insistence on their paying taxes before their children could be registered for school, threatened to go naked...; and more recently, the anti-oil company demonstrations of 2002 in the Delta, it would seem the history of women’s protest in

Nigeria has been both continuous and effective” (Ogunyemi, 11) The nude protest that foreigners dismissed as “voodoo ‘beliefs” (Saro., 1993) coincided in the death of Mr. Van Hoort and two weeks later General Mustapha Ali Dongo, the then Military ruler also died “in weird circumstances” (*The Activist*, 217). Thus Ojaide, like Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi elevate the feminine gender for bringing down “tyrants that their men failed to remove” (*The Activist*, 217). All forms of protest against the federal government and Bell Oil by the Area boys led by Pere, the Activist, Omagbemi, students, women and others implicate that the Niger Delta people have not been docile. Infact Isaac Boro was the forerunner in the agitation against the neglect of the region. Boro adopted a violent approach in tackling the problems of the Niger Delta.

The multi-nationals are crafty and they do not want the world to know their wrong doings. For instance, they were able to deny the Niger Delta delegation clearance to travel abroad. Dr. Otiti the leader of the delegation was brutalized and tagged a saboteur. All their passports were confiscated. Ojaide writes:

Within days of the aborted overseas trip of all the oil community delegation, federal secret service agents descended on Niger Delta state for what they described as a major security operation. They raided offices and homes of the delegates and confiscated documents, coloured pictures and maps, slides and video cassettes taken of sites of oil pollution. The agents were surprised at the tones of documents especially the different parts of the Niger Delta... They treated all the members of the delegation as suspects in a grand plot... (203- 204).

This is why Saro-Wiwa publicized his activism in the region. Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders were executed by hanging on 10 November, 1995.

Despite their supposed smartness, Pere in collaboration with The Activist and the Area boys made money through oil bunkering. During the national strike they sold their products, exploited the multinationals, built houses, hotels and set up their businesses. In a dramatic twist, the staff of Bell Oil patronized Pere’s hotel, while he in turn exploited them to his advantage. The Activist’s newspaper, known as The Patriot highlighted the activities in the region and some of the boys were gainfully employed there. With the sacking of the military it is hoped that the new leader, the Activist will take the region to greater height and eliminate all forms of oppression, marginalization bio-terrorism and discrimination in the region.

Conclusions

From the foregoing, it is evident that the female gender is coming out of their cocoon and asserting their individuality and collective self in their various communities. They are providing leadership at home and in their society and are saying “NO” to the marginalization and exploitation of their resources especially as it affects their sex, health and socio-political life. Women in the Niger Delta region want to live freely and conduct their businesses in an eco-friendly environment, devoid of pollution, degradation, terrorism, victimization and all forms of injustices metted on them by the government and multi-national. They want the region to be fully developed and social amenities like road, schools, water, electricity etc provided for the people, instead of living in abject poverty and squalor. Ojaide’s juxtaposition of the living quarters of oil workers and that of the poor villagers is indeed illuminating and calls for genuine concern and a turn around.

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