



Economic and Social Exploitation in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

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Abstract

*This research scrutinises the economic and social exploitation depicted in Nigerian literature, focusing on Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* using qualitative research design. The oil boom and subsequent exploration of oil in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta has continued to influence and incite writers, especially Nigerian writers who lend their voices towards the plight of Niger Delta region and its people. Hence, this study examines the systematic neglect and exploitation of the Niger Delta region by the foreign oil companies and the government, which has led to widespread poverty, environmental degradation, and militancy in the region. Through the literary lens of the novel under study and a deep application of Eco-criticism, this study highlights the economic disenfranchisement of the local populace, the social exploitation of vulnerable individuals, and the devastating environmental impacts of oil extraction. The findings underscore the urgent need for stringent environmental regulations, equitable resource management, and socio-economic development to address the region's challenges. By advocating for participatory governance, this paper aim to create consciousness on the urgent need to pay attention to the voices of the Niger Delta people crying for human and environmental development of their region.*

Keywords: Nigerian Literature, Niger Delta, Oil Boom, Eco-criticism, Exploitation, Degradation, Militancy.

Background to the Study

The Niger Delta region, in southern Nigeria, is one of the most resource-rich areas in Africa, boasting vast reserves of oil and natural gas. This wealth of natural resources has made the Niger Delta the economic backbone of Nigeria, contributing the lion's share of the country's revenue. Despite this, the region remains one of the most impoverished and underdeveloped parts of Nigeria, plagued by environmental degradation, social unrest, and economic exploitation. The contradictions between the wealth generated by the oil

industry and the poverty experienced by the local population have been a significant source of tension and conflict in the region. These contradictions have also been a rich source of material for Nigerian literature, particularly for writers who seek to address issues of economic and social exploitation.

The situation in the Niger Delta can be traced back to the discovery of oil in the 1950s. Since then, the region has been at the center of Nigeria's oil industry, with multinational corporations extracting billions of dollars' worth of oil. However, the benefits of this extraction have largely bypassed the local communities. Instead of prosperity, the people of the

Niger Delta have faced environmental devastation, loss of livelihoods, and a lack of basic infrastructure. Oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation have destroyed the once-fertile land and rich waterways that sustained local agriculture and fishing. As a result, many communities have been pushed into poverty, with few opportunities for economic advancement.

The environmental degradation of the Niger Delta is not just an ecological disaster; it is also a social and economic one. The pollution has rendered the land and water unusable, cutting off the primary sources of income for many people. This has led to widespread unemployment and poverty, exacerbating social tensions in the region. The frustration and anger of the local population have been further fueled by the fact that the wealth generated from oil has largely been siphoned off by corrupt government officials and foreign corporations, leaving little for the development of the region. This has led to a sense of betrayal and alienation among the people of the Niger Delta, who feel that they have been exploited and abandoned by both the Nigerian state and the international community. The exploitation of the Niger Delta is also not just an economic issue; but a deeply political one (Saka and Omede, 329). The region has been the site of significant social unrest, with militant groups emerging to demand a greater share of the oil revenues and greater autonomy for the region. These groups have used a variety of tactics, including sabotage, kidnapping, and armed resistance, to draw attention to their plight and to pressure the government and oil companies to address their demands. The conflict has resulted in a cycle of violence and instability, with the government responding with military force and the militants escalating their attacks. This has further aggravated the already dire situation in the region, leading to widespread human rights abuses and the displacement of thousands of people.

Against this backdrop of exploitation and conflict, Nigerian literature has emerged as a powerful tool for social commentary and resistance. Writers from the Niger Delta and beyond have used their works to highlight the plight of the region and to critique the economic and social injustices that have been inflicted upon it. Writers such as Tanure Ojaide has explored themes of economic exploitation, social injustice, environmental degradation, and cultural erosion in their novels and poetry. Their narratives not only depict the harsh realities faced by communities in the Niger Delta but also critique the political and economic structures that perpetuate these injustices. This research seeks to delve into how Nigerian literature, particularly through the lens of work like Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, engages with and critiques economic and social exploitation in the Niger Delta.

Therefore, the problem this paper addresses is the widespread poverty, environmental degradation, and social unrest in the Niger Delta Region. Despite the region's significant contribution to Nigeria's economy, the region's communities suffer from exploitation, neglect, and political marginalisation.

The research's area of concern is to investigate how Nigerian literature, particularly Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* critiques these injustices. By exploring themes of economic and social exploitation, this work reveal the human cost of resource extraction and the deep-seated inequalities that fuel conflict and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT SCHOLARSHIPS

Nwagbara in "Political Power and Intellectual Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*", explores the impact of political violence and socio-economic issues in Nigeria's Niger Delta, attributing these problems to the failures of both the ruling class and multinational corporations. This analysis focuses on Tanure Ojaide's novel *The Activist*, which explores the impacts of post-colonial disillusionment with oil politics, ethnic marginalisation, and environmental degradation in Nigeria. The research emphasises that the novel's title reflects the need for political activism to reform Nigeria's political landscape. It highlights that intellectual activism is crucial for transforming Nigeria's political environment.

Scholars Umezina and Yakubu in "Gender Discourse and the Portraiture of Women Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*" conducted a study on *The Activist*, focusing on the intersection of language and gender, particularly examining the role of women in activist advocacy within the Niger Delta region. The research assesses the effectiveness of the female gender in contributing to the struggle against exploitation and oppression, contrasting traditional African views with those of modern, educated African women who are forging new identities. The research explores how women engage in activism through various means, including peaceful negotiations, violent demonstrations, and actions rooted in cultural taboos.

Ujowundu's "Beyond Pardon in Niger-Delta Politics: Exploitation and Disillusionment in Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*", examines the deep-seated issues of disillusionment, frustration, and dehumanisation in Nigerian society, tracing these problems back to the advent of colonialism and the subsequent poor governance and followership that have plagued the nation. The study focuses on two novels- Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*- which both satirise the pervasive corruption among the ruling class and its detrimental effects on society. The researcher highlights how these novels reflect a society steeped in corruption, leading to what is termed as the "literature of post-independence disillusionment". The study identifies recurring themes of oppression, exploitation, corruption, suppression, cruelty, intimidation, and class consciousness as central to the relationship between the rich and the poor as depicted by the authors.

Unlike these studies, this study focuses specifically on the economic and social exploitation depicted in this novel,

providing a more targeted analysis of these issues. We would explain some basic concepts.

Economic exploitation

Economic exploitation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria epitomises a stark and ongoing struggle between resource wealth and human suffering. This exploitation is deeply rooted in historical and contemporary practices that have led to profound economic and environmental consequences. The extraction of oil, initiated during the colonial era, was primarily geared towards benefiting the colonial powers and their economic interests, often at the expense of local communities. In post-colonial Nigeria, this pattern has persisted, with multinational oil companies and local elites reaping significant profits while the local population endures adverse impacts. Despite the immense wealth generated by oil revenues, the Niger Delta remains one of Nigeria's most impoverished regions. This disparity highlights a classic case of economic exploitation, where the benefits of natural resource extraction are concentrated among a few, while the broader community bears the brunt of environmental degradation and socio-economic neglect. Economic exploitation in the Niger Delta also manifests in the marginalisation of local communities in decision-making processes. The lack of adequate representation and involvement in the management of oil resources means that the economic gains do not translate into improved living conditions or infrastructure for the region's residents. This disconnect between resource wealth and local well-being reflects a broader pattern of exploitation, where economic advantages are not equitably shared, leaving local populations to contend with the consequences of environmental degradation and economic neglect.

Social Exploitation

Social exploitation highlights the severe inequality and injustice experienced by local communities despite their region's immense oil wealth. The oil industry's presence has not only exacerbated economic disparities but also led to the marginalisation and disenfranchisement of the Niger Delta's inhabitants. Social exploitation in this context involves the systemic neglect and marginalisation of local populations. Oil extraction operations have often disregarded the traditional land rights and cultural practices of indigenous communities, leading to displacement and loss of ancestral lands. The influx of external workers and the influx of resources into the region have also disrupted social structures, eroding local governance and traditional authority.

Moreover, the wealth generated from oil has largely bypassed the local communities, with benefits concentrated among government officials and multinational corporations. This has led to a stark contrast between the opulence of oil companies and the dire living conditions faced by many Niger Delta residents. The social fabric of the region has been strained by increased crime, corruption, and social unrest, further

reflecting the deep-seated exploitation and inequity perpetuated by the oil industry's operations.

Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is a pressing issue that vividly illustrates the adverse impacts of industrial exploitation on natural ecosystems. The Niger Delta has been severely affected by decades of oil extraction, leading to widespread environmental harm that threatens both the region's ecological balance and the health of its inhabitants. The extraction of oil in the Niger Delta involves practices such as gas flaring and frequent oil spills, which have devastating effects on the environment. The burning of excess gas extracted alongside oil, releases toxic fumes into the atmosphere, contributing to air pollution and respiratory problems among local communities. Oil spills, often caused by equipment failures or sabotage, contaminate land and water sources, poisoning aquatic life and rendering fishing and farming untenable for local residents. The destruction of mangroves and wetlands, crucial for maintaining ecological balance and supporting biodiversity, has further worsened environmental degradation. These ecosystems serve as vital buffers against coastal erosion and as breeding grounds for fish and wildlife. Their loss undermines the resilience of the region's natural environment, increasing vulnerability to flooding and disrupting traditional livelihoods that depend on fishing and agriculture. The cumulative impact of these environmental challenges not only affects the health and well-being of the Niger Delta's population but also reflects a broader pattern of neglect and exploitation in resource-rich regions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Eco-criticism, a theory that emerged from a growing recognition of the intertwined relationship between literature and the environment. The formalisation of eco-criticism as a scholarly field is often attributed to pioneers such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell. Glotfelty played a significant role in defining eco-criticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (230), showing how man's relationship with his physical environment is reflected in literature. Buell's work further expanded the scope of eco-criticism, especially with his influential book, *The Environmental Imagination*, which examined the ways in which American literature has historically engaged with nature.

In this research, eco-criticism sheds light on environmental issues, ecological trauma, and the impact of human activities on nature. It also offers a powerful lens through which to explore themes of economic and social exploitation.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach to explore the themes of economic and social exploitation in Nigerian literature, specifically focusing on Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, the primary text for the study. The study employs a descriptive and analytical design, utilising close reading and textual analysis to examine the selected novel.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *THE ACTIVIST* BY TANURE OJAIDE

Synopsis of the Novel.

The Activist is a thought-provoking novel about the Niger-Delta and its people. The novel dwells on environmental degradation, the antics of the oil companies and corruption among the local elites, and the military government. Through the collection of three enigmatic characters -the Activist, a radical scholar, Ebi, and Pere, Ojaide depicted and portrayed the Niger Delta issues as it affects the people of the region even till present day Nigeria. The novel is a befitting tribute to the late novelist, social critic, and environmentalist, Ken Saro Wiwa, whose activism spirit is seen in the *Activist*, the protagonist of the novel as he struggles to set things right for his people. The nameless protagonist, known as the Activist throughout the novel, leaves the soft life in America, returns back to Nigeria, and joins the bandwagon to develop his native land deeply rooted in corruption, abuse of human rights, environmental pollution, betrayal, tragedy and different forms of violence. The novel deals with the need to have a government that works and is beneficial to the masses, and it is an addition to the fast-growing corpus of radical and environmental literature in Africa.

Economic Exploitation and Neglect of the Niger Delta Region.

In *The Activist*, Ojaide portrays Niger Delta's situation following the discovery of oil in the region, which brought the exploration and exploitation of the natural resources. Oil exploration in the region led to degradation of the environment, dehumanisation of the people of the region, as well as economic exploitation of the people and their mineral resources by the military government, the oil companies, and the greedy monarchs and their chiefs. Despite being rich in oil and natural resources, the Niger Delta region has been a focal point of economic exploitation. This exploitation is perpetuated by various factors, including the government, multinational oil companies, and, regrettably, local elites such as chiefs and monarchs. Ojaide writes:

Nigeria's oil production had risen from about four hundred thousand to more than two million barrels a day and the country had joined the Organisation of Oil-Producing and

Exporting Countries and had remained ranked sixth among them. Bell Oil and other oil companies had been given free hand by the military rulers to do all it took to continue increasing production. While that meant more money in the government's coffers to sustain dictatorship, it also meant total disregard of the Niger Delta people and their environment (46).

The Nigerian military government represented by the dark goggled military Head of State, Mustapha Ali Dongo, plays a significant role in the economic exploitation of the Niger Delta. Despite the region's substantial contribution to the national economy, the benefits have not been equitably distributed. The federal government controls the oil revenues, with only a small fraction allocated to the oil-producing states. This centralisation of resources has led to underfunding of local development projects, inadequate infrastructure, and poor public services in the Niger Delta region where this novel is set, while the revenues generated in the region is being used to develop the capital city and the other satellite cities. The writer states that:

The proceeds from oil went to Lagos to build a festival town for the black peoples of the world to celebrate their culture and arts and also to construct unending bridges to connect water-separated (sic) parts of the teeming city. Other oil gains also went to build an entire new capital on rocks in the windy savannah (49-50).

Government's policies often favour the interests of multinational oil companies over those of the local communities. The military government protects the insensitive oil exploiters by deploying armed police, soldiers, and other armed forces to intimidate and harass the people when they raise their voices against exploitation. The Activist, the protagonist of the novel, as a young boy, left his local community in Niger Delta to the United States as a refugee because of the massacre of his people by soldiers and mobile police working at the behest of the military government and the oil companies because his people dared to bring in foreign journalist to document the degree of their exploitation, and the

pollution of their environment. In order to protect themselves from the embarrassment it would cause them, they decided to teach the people a lesson by silencing them. The Activist narrowly escaped being killed with two bullets lodged in his right knee. Another incident recorded was when an oil blowout, caused by a pipe leakage and fuelled by gas flares ravaged Ekakpamre community and its people. Bell oil knew about the blowout but did not send its fire-fighting team to put out the fire. The fire burned out their river and destroyed plants and houses rendering many homeless. The residents were helpless before the monstrous fire that covered the whole area with thick black smoke and ashes. As a result, a lot of pregnant women went into premature labour, and those with poor eyesight worsened in the situation that befell them. Ojaide portrayed the callousness of both the oil company whose pipes caused the disaster and the federal government that was supposed to protect its citizens against this man-made disaster.

The government is corrupt and all it cares for is the revenue that comes from oil without caring about the well-being of the people of Niger Delta or about the development of the region, and the oil companies are aware of this, therefore they exploit the oil and the people that own the oil, leaving destructions behind them. Ojaide narrates the exploitation, marginalisation, and neglect of the Deltas as thus:

The oil-producing people were left in the lurch. Children of the Boma boys dropped out of school and those that graduated from secondary schools had no jobs. Areas in which Boma boys had lived lacked social amenities and the government failed to address the problems. The Federal military government operated a quota system that favoured inland states that inflated their population by counting their cows, dogs, and goats as humans. That was what they believed a national census to be all about. Since they had population advantage, the people of those states enjoyed the oil prosperity at the expense of the hard-toiling farmers and fishermen and women, whose lands,

waters and air were polluted by oil slicks, blowouts, and permanent flares that made hell a daily experience of the Niger Delta people (50).

Also, multinational oil companies are major players in the exploitation of the Niger Delta's resources. There are many of them scattered all over the region and these companies have been accused of prioritising profit over the welfare of the local communities. Environmental issues as a result of oil extraction have devastated local agriculture and fishing industries, which are vital sources of livelihood for many residents. The protagonist of the novel, the Activist, upon his return to the Niger Delta after several years abroad would discover that "his Niger Delta had a new face, an ugly or rather sick face that was different from the pristine one he used to know" (47). Before the discovery of oil in the region, they grow much needed vegetables and they lived a healthy life. Their air used to be cool because of constant rain and healthy trees that adorn their environment, but not anymore because oil slicks, blowouts and gas flares have destroyed that life they used to have. They no longer drink rain water because, "even the rain that fell was so soot-black that no more did anybody drink rainwater, which, of all waters, used to be described God-given water (70). When Ebi and the Activist went on a boat ride downstream, they discovered that a lot of destruction has taken place and nothing is being done to salvage the situation. The Activist recalled that his mother used to prepare meals with fresh crayfish straight from the river. According to him:

Whenever my mother wanted to prepare a meal with crayfish, she literally put a pot on the fire and took her scooping net and went to the nearby lake to catch fish, she returned within a half-hour with just enough fish to prepare a delicious palm oil soup. Now the oil companies are pouring poisons into them, giving these natural sustainers of the people a final deathblow (87).

Ebi recalled a list of luxuries their people enjoyed in the past which are no longer available because of oil exploration. The people had so many cash crops they eat and sell such as oil-beans, breadfruit, grapes, apples, cherry, and other food crops and vegetables. Despite these destruction caused by oil exploration, the oil companies cared less about the well-being of the local populace of the region, rather they often engage in practices that undermine local economies without considering the interest of the indigenes. Instead of creating employment for the local people as part of compensation for destroying their means of livelihood, they rather import labour and materials from outside the region, providing few employment opportunities for local residents. They brought in people from other states to come fill jobs that were supposed to create employment for the people whose environment and their source of livelihood are being destroyed by oil industry.

Compensation for land and resource use is often inadequate, leaving communities impoverished despite the wealth generated from their land. All these they do without an atom of fear because they work hand in hand with the government, and all these inhumane activities go on unchecked. When The Activist and a group of like-minded individuals under the name of The Niger Delta Delegation gathered pictures and other written material on the ills perpetrated by Bell Oil and other oil companies in the region, to tender as exhibits at the United Nations Organisation conference on oil exploration and its effects on the local communities, The Federal Military Government officials at the airport refused to clear them, rather, they tortured and humiliated them and refused them right to travel and attend the conference. When they returned home, federal secret service agents invaded and raided the homes and offices of the delegates and confiscated documents, coloured pictures and maps, video cassettes and other implicating materials taken from the sites of oil pollution which the delegates intended to tender at the world conference to draw the attention of the world to their situation in the Niger Delta region. This move would have exposed the evil activities of these oil companies, put a total stop to these activities and bring a new life to the people of the region because United Nations and other international bodies would have demanded for full compensation from the oil companies for all the destructions they have brought upon the region and its people, but the military rulers benefit a lot from this activities, hence would want the exploitation to go on unchecked. To appreciate the government for saving them from the embarrassment that would have caused them a lot, the oil companies sent a huge appreciation to the government. They met secretly to discuss buying a new executive jet to replace the ageing one being used by the president (206).

Another major concern in this study is internal exploitation by the local elites, including chiefs and monarchs which is another critical issue in the Niger Delta region. These individuals often act as intermediaries between the oil companies and the local communities. In many cases, they

have been accused of colluding with the oil companies and the government to siphon off resources meant for community development. This collusion result in the misappropriation of funds, leaving the broader community without the benefits of the region's natural wealth. The actions of these local elites contribute to a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. By prioritising their personal gain over the welfare of their people, they perpetuate the exploitation and neglect of the region. This internal exploitation is often overlooked but is a significant factor in the region's ongoing struggles. Among all the chiefs depicted in this novel by the writer, only Chief Tobi Ishaka has the interest of his people at heart. Other chiefs, including the monarchs collect brown envelopes from the oil companies and join hands with them to exploit their people. Instead of speaking out against the injustices, exploitation and marginalisation meted upon their region and its people, they collect bribes from their exploiters and look the other way; a case of the exploited joining hands with the exploiters to exploit their people. Ojaide captured this internal exploitation when he wrote that:

The oil companies, to silence the local population from demanding compensations for their despoiled environment, built palaces for local monarchs. They not only paid the monarchs and chiefs monthly stipends but also catered for their luxuries that included big cars and jeeps. The multinational oil company directors expected the elderly chiefs to keep a strong hold on their people because the well-fed dogs would not bite the hands that fed them (111).

Resistance and Resilience against Economic and Social Exploitation

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been a hotspot for militancy, driven by a complex web of socio-economic and environmental issues. Militancy in the region can be attributed to several interrelated factors like economic exploitation and marginalisation, environmental degradation, political marginalisation, poor governance, failure of amnesty programs and so on. The local communities in the Niger Delta have long felt excluded from the wealth generated by oil extraction. Also, the people of the Niger Delta have historically been marginalised in the political arena which fuels the feelings of disenfranchisement and injustice. Poor

governance and corruption have compounded the region's problems as funds meant for development are often misappropriated, leaving the local population without basic infrastructure and services. A close study of *The Activist* show that these issues as well as insensitivity of the government and multinational oil companies are the major causes of youth restiveness and violence in the region which is seen in the conflicts between the military government and the militants, killings, vandalisation of oil pipes etc. The youth in the region have turned militants, picking up arms, because they want to draw attention of the world to their degraded environment. Militancy as depicted by Ojaide started as Boma Boys and metamorphosed to Area Boys also known as Egba Boys. They stood up against the corrupt military governments and the greedy oil companies to fight for their rights and reclaim their destroyed lands. They engage in stealing and kidnapping and they target those that are robbing them of their natural resources and their accomplices.

The Area Boys according to the writer "were not mindless but hardened locals who felt they had to share in whatever they could from the economic life of their communities" (50). Their grievances were that the government and oil companies brought in people from other states to fill the job spaces in the oil industry that was destroying not only their environment but also their sources of living, thereby exploiting and marginalising them. They were thrown out of their paradise, rejected and deprived of having a fair share of resources gotten from their lands. They became a bitter group and they would do anything to wrestle some money from these outsiders exploiting them. Therefore, from the ransoms they get from kidnappings and the money they get from oil bunkering and vandalisation of oil pipelines, they build up personal wealth, and this is seen in the life of Pere, who rose from a mere street urchin to a multimillionaire. Pere is the leader of the Area Boys and he 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 the military government and Bell Oil accountable for the destruction they brought upon Niger Delta region. To the Area Boys, Bell Oil Company stole their wealth and used it to develop their own country and left them impoverished, therefore, they fight for their rights, protecting their environment, and this resilience is a key theme in understanding militancy as a form of resistance against exploitation as seen in this novel under study.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* reveals the multidimensional exploitation faced by the Niger Delta region and its people. The novel poignantly depicted the economic and social injustices perpetuated by both the oil companies and the government, leading to severe consequences for the local communities. The economic exploitation and neglect of the Niger Delta region are vividly illustrated through the

systematic deprivation and marginalisation of its inhabitants. The relentless extraction of oil has not only enriched the multinational corporations and the government, but has also impoverished the local populace, stripping them of their traditional livelihoods and plunging them into abject poverty. This economic disenfranchisement has fueled militancy, as disenfranchised youths resort to violence in a desperate bid for justice and survival.

To address these profound issues, there must be stringent enforcement of environmental regulations to hold oil companies accountable for their actions. This includes comprehensive clean-up efforts and adequate compensation for affected communities. Also, the government must prioritise the development of the Niger Delta, investing in infrastructure, education, and healthcare to uplift the region's socio-economic status. Lastly, fostering dialogue and reconciliation between the government, oil companies, and local communities can pave way for sustainable peace and development in the Niger Delta.

In essence, the literary exploration of these themes in *The Activist* not only sheds light on the grim realities faced by the Niger Delta but also calls for urgent and comprehensive solutions to rectify decades of exploitation and neglect. By addressing these issues holistically, it is possible to envision a future where the Niger Delta thrives both economically and socially, free from the shackles of exploitation.

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