

A Marxist Reading of Tanure Ojaide's *the Activist*

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Abstract

The oil in the Niger Delta was supposed to put smiles on the faces of the poor masses whose farmlands and rivers harbour the liquid gold. Rather, it brought misery and a bigger gap between the haves and the have-nots in the region. It brought chaos and disarray to the region. This study, therefore, explores Marxist Approach to Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. In line with Marxist ideals, Marxism which is anchored on the emancipation of the oppressed was adopted as the theoretical lens for the study. A thorough perusal of the texts reveals that both the Niger Delta people and their environment have suffered untold hardship from the immoral exploration of oil by oil companies. It also portrays the greedy nature of the leaders of the region who are bankrolled by the federal government and the oil companies to betray the trust of their people. But like most Marxist texts, the subjugated Niger Delta masses awakened and wrenched power from the greedy few by electing The Activist as the Executive Governor of Niger Delta State.

Keywords:

Marxist, the poor, the defenseless, Niger Delta, emancipation

Introduction

When oil was first discovered in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, in large quantity in 1958, the entire people of Niger Delta rejoiced. There was a spring of hope in the collective future of the region. The people envisioned a better future for themselves and their loved ones. But when the exploration of the oil and the diary of unwanted destruction of the environment began to unveil, their hope gradually made way for despair. Recollecting the coming of the Multinational companies and how the infamous exploration began, Ojaide in *The Great Boys: An African Childhood* writes:

Sometime after the rains in 1958, about late October, Shell-BP came. A lot of people, from cities, came to our area. They came wearing helmets, in pickups jeeps....they tore through forests, through rubber plantations, through farmlands and through creeks, cutting paths....The opposite direction cleared into the bush to make way for the other.(126)

After tearing through the forest and farmlands, and destroying the flora and fauna of the Niger Deltans and their sources of livelihood, they are left with nothing. The supposed leaders of the various affected communities who tried to speak up were bribed by the rich oil companies and they backtracked. The poor farmers and fishermen whose sources of income were destroyed were left in misery. Not even the proceeds of the oil exploration were used to compensate the languishing communities. The money was shared between the leaders in cities and the oil companies. Describing the painful situation, Ken Saro-Wiwa in *A Month and A Day: A Detention Diary* writes:

The population of Lagos had exploded once oil money from the Delta had been cornered by the nation's rulers and transferred to Lagos from hapless communities like the Ogoni and the Ijaws who were too few to defend their inheritance....most of that money was also spent on foreign luxuries like cars, and soon the few roads in the city were clogged with cars, rendering movement well nigh impossible. Overhead bridges became the norms of this city". (33-34)

When the proceeds of the oil are carted away to various cities and the host communities are neglected in misery, protest becomes the only alternative. The entire Niger Delta became dichotomized in protest between the leaders who are bought by the oil companies and the poor whose farmlands were destroyed. Writers as watchdogs of the society joined the protest in advocating for the emancipation of the common man. Like Chinua Achebe advocated in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* for writers not to be excused from the task of re-education, Niger Delta writers marched out in defense of their people and the environment. This led to what is described as Niger Delta Literature which aims at liberating the men and women of the region from the clutches of oppression. Chinyere Nwahunanya in the introduction of *From Boom to Doom: The Niger Delta in Contemporary Nigerian Literature* captures it thus:

From those we refer to as the pioneers or patriarchs of the Niger Delta Literature, we notice ab initio a dominant concern for the plight of men and the environment in the region. The literary responses were indeed aimed at highlighting the socio-economic, political, environmental, and other problems that have affected the human population and the flora and fauna in the region. (xiv)

Tanure Ojaide being one of the notable scholars of the region, joined the protest and in this masterpiece, presents a gory state of his people's situation. He advocates for an intellectual uprising that will catalyze a change in the condition of his people. This study shall therefore scrutinize his presentation of the ill-treatment of the people of the region using the Marxist Approach that aims to liberate the oppressed.

Marxist Ideology

Marxism is a political cum socio-economic ideology that originated from the writings of Karl Marx and Federick Engels. It advocates for a revolution in favor of the proletariats in a capitalist society. Advocates of Marxist ideology believe that a typical capitalist society is partitioned between the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor, the employers and the employees in which those with the advantage of wealth and power exploit and oppress the have-nots. In the Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx and Engels opine that:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journey man, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight that each time ended, either in revolutionary reconstruction of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.
(33)

The above captures the condition of the Nigerian masses. The stratification is between the rich elite few who constitute the bourgeoisie emasculating the poor who constitute the majority. This aligns with K.U Omoyibo's assertion in his "Marxism and the Nigerian State",

In Nigeria, the state is a key factor in the Nigerian economy. It determines the direction of production, distribution, and allocation of resources as State institutions are parts of the superstructure determined by the interest of the dominant class. The state becomes an interest of the ruling class as defined in terms of control over the means of production. This dominance is expressed in terms of laws and policies that are made by the state which represent the interest of the dominant group. (22-23)

Successive Nigerian governments have always protected the interest of the elite few. It has suppressed and jailed those who try to break the age-long dominance of the ruling class. This oppressor posture of the Nigerian leaders and elite using the instruments of the state is part of what was inherited from the colonial masters. Institutions of the state which are supposed to protect the common man are used to subjugate them for the benefit of a few. This greedy behavior is displayed by leaders of the Niger Delta region who connive with the Federal Government and the oil companies to oppress their people. The adoption of the Marxist approach is necessitated by the inhumanity of these men towards the poor defenseless citizens of the Niger Delta region.

A Marxist Reading of Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

The Activist by Tanure Ojaide is a novel written with a strong depiction of the atrocious activities of Bell and O & G Companies against the people of the Niger Delta. It is a strong portrayal of oppression, exploitation, and degradation of the poor by the bourgeoisie, Bell, and O & G in collaboration with the Federal Military Government. The Novel like every other Marxist text is grouped into the oppressor and the oppressed. The Federal Military government, Bell O& G, and its allies

represent the oppressors while the titular character, “the Activist” and the people of Niger Delta represent the oppressed.

In *The Activist*, oppression of the poor people of Niger Delta by the Federal government and Multinational Companies is a constant thing. The people are brutalized, maimed, and incessantly killed whenever they try to challenge the oppressor or let the world know what they are passing through. The author, telling how “The Activist” (the main character) went to America showcases the degree of brutality of the oppressors.

Often, “The Activist” did not want to revisit the circumstances that had brought him to the United States. He had come 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 major Oil Company. The two parties colluded to wipe out his village because his people had dared to bring in foreign Journalists to document the degree of their exploitation and the pollution of their environment. (26)

After brutalizing the people, they are left to mourn their dead and lick their wounds. There is no form of compensation for the people wrongfully killed but a stern warning that it will happen again. The Federal Military securities are charged with all mannerisms to silence the poor people of the Niger Delta. From this standpoint, the soldiers commit all forms of heinous crimes against these people. This is described below:

The soldiers in charge of security harassed people, extorted money, raped women, robbed and shot dead those who resisted the extortion and robbery and described them as saboteurs of peace... to prove they meant business, the checkpoint Solders shot a deaf man

with his dog for not throwing his hands up in order to keep the peace. (186)

The people are not only physically brutalized, but their environment is also under unending brutality from the activity of oil exploration. The pipes crisscrossing the villages are worn out and always burst into a flame of fire. According to the author:

There was an outburst of Crude oil that easily caught fire, the village was burnt to the ground. It took a whole day of the Company doing nothing. It did not even send a fire department team to put out the fire. They knew that there was a blow out and the fire vehicles was stationed at a location less than twenty miles away but they sat in their offices and issued a statement that the native population was sabotaging the pipelines. (158)

When something like this happens, the Oil companies and the Federal Military Government see it as an opportunity to accuse the people who have incurred heavy losses. They let such things happen to wipe out the entire population of the people that cry out against their inhuman activities.

While killing and silencing of the voices of the poor continue in the land, the creeks and sea are drastically turning into a death sight. The sea and its aquatic lives are all “confined to memory” the author described the annihilation in these words:

The magnitude of the desolation of water shocked them. Where were the flying fish that use to shoot out of the water into the air and somersault back into the water? That spectacle was now confined to memory...(the water light) green, greasy and smelly. The large fish population had either been decimated by

chemicals from oil industry or migrated downstream into the ocean. Where were the flock of stocks, kingfishers and many exotic types of birds that filled the airspace as one approached the Ocean? (84)

When “The Activist” and Ebi went boating like they did in their childhood, they realized that everything is gone. All they once held dear; the plants and the fruitful trees. That is when they realized that the oppressors came to send them into extinction. Ebi and “The Activist” lamented the destruction in these words:

What happened to our oil beans, breadfruits, mushroom, Urhurhu grapes, owe apple and Otie cherry fruit? Either gone or barely available! Where are the water leaf, greens, water Okpeyinyam, Taro roots and sweet cassava that were such a pleasure to eat?... our people watch their waters turn to poison, their land become crust from blowouts., and the air, become hot from poisonous gas. They do nothing to stop the hands that want to strangle them. (86-87)

The dependence on the hard earned resources of the working masses, the poor or the proletariat is often the main source of wealth for the bourgeoisie or the ruling class. In *The Activist* by Tanure Ojaide, the poor people of the Niger Delta are feasted upon with all manner of exploitation from the Federal Military government, the oil companies, and their leaders as well as the bourgeoisie. The conversation below between the Activist and Pere portrayed the exploitative nature of Bell oil company who pretends to the media that they are developing the Niger Delta but is doing the opposite.

“Bell Oil na himself e dey look after not us” “We never reach dem place but we know say e better pass here” Pere responded. “Na dream world dem dey live for their

place; we dey the hell they create for black people. The Activist had also said. The Activist talked as one who really knew something about the exploitative nature of Bell Oil Company. (96)

The Oil companies did not stop at exploiting the environmental resources of the people in what Alfred Crosby would call “ecological imperialism” but also used the trained sons of the Niger Delta region to do so. This is seen in the character of Professor Kokoba and Professor Tabore Ede whom Bell appointed Community Development Officers. In the case of the pipes crisscrossing their villages, the ever-callous Bell found ways to capitalize on the people’s ignorance to exploit them by sending their sons to lie to them. The author narrates:

When the villagers had protested many years ago about these many pipelines crisscrossing their villages, the oil Companies bribed their Chief twenty miles away in Warri and sent the then Community Development Officer, Professor Kokoba to tell them that they were safe. The Villagers doubted that they were safe but there was nothing they could do after their own son they had contributed to send to study Law in England... assured them that they were safe. (154-155)

The Oil companies did not stop at using only intellectuals; they also used their traditional rulers – the leaders of the people. Didn’t Achebe say that the “... trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a problem of leadership” (1)? These corrupt leaders are given money and gifts to help them silence the people. The local bourgeoisie always identifies and aligns with the international bourgeoisie to grind the poor to perpetual misery. It is x-rayed here as the Chiefs defend Bell that destroys the people and their sources of livelihood.

“We have no robbers or enemies here” the monarch intervened. “Bell Oil Company is our friend and partner in progress” “Your Royal Highness” Chief Ishaka replied; I like them to be friends and partners, but they are not now. Unless we are unequal partners, they take away our wealth and leave us tidbits to quarrel over as we are doing now. (112)

It is only Chief Tobi Ishaka that is not bought over by the Oil Companies. He is the only one that rejects their gifts and the author has this to say about him: “You could count on Chief Ishaka, to tell the truth, and knowing that the people were being shortchanged” (112).

The exploitation of the people’s resources continues even on the road as Police employed by the Federal Military government to safeguard the activities of the evil oil companies also join their bosses in exploiting the poor. The author writes:

On every major street in town they placed a big drum. There, every passing car, bus, or motorbike dropped twenty naira. Some car drivers who panicked when they saw police with a gun had no time to look for a twenty naira note so threw in one hundred or two hundred naira to be free from police trouble. From morning till night the drums get filled many times, fulfilling the Police mantra: drop by drop the big drums get filled. (187)

The poor or the lower class are exploited in the Niger Delta. The multinational Oil companies in collaboration with the government and the elite class join hands together to maim the poor, strip them of their sources of livelihood and send them to extinction.

When the poor people of the Niger Delta have been pushed to the wall, they have no other option but to start pushing back in the little way they can. This is seen after the Roko village blowouts and the students planned a mass protest against the oppressors, the then Community Development Officer Prof. Tabore Ede is sort by Bell to calm the enraged students but failed. The people are fed up. The author writes:

The situation suddenly became rowdy and chaotic and in the commotion that followed, a group of students forced tyre round the don's neck. All of a sudden the ebullient don had become a sacrificial animal that was bound and helpless. The students dragged him outside to the open field, filled the tyre with petrol and set him ablaze. They had come prepared to thwart the tricks of Bell Oil Company and its expensively robed Community Development Officers. (157)

After this incident, "The Activist" continues preaching his message of change and revolution. He enlightens the students on the task that must be done. He urges them not to be neutral but to join a side. It is either the side of the oppressor/exploiter or the side of the oppressed/exploited. He preaches: There was no neutral ground; either you were on one side or the other. He also told them. One cannot be with the exploiter and the exploited at the same time. The slave owner and the slave cannot be on the same side. One must be on the side of humanity. It was cowardly not to choose to take sides. (p.152)

His message gradually sinks into various quarters of the exploited masses. The head of the Area boys seeks his acquaintance and learns a lot about their common enemy. He goes home educating and agitating his boys in these words: "If we cannot live on our water, land, and air then we are finished"

he reasoned. “Those who take away our wealth must pay dearly for it”. He often told his area boys” (p.70).

“The Activist” does everything that will trigger a revolution and bring discomfort to the oppressors. He even gets involved in Oil bunkering from whence he makes money partly used to kick-start his newspaper company – The Patriots. The author writes:

For the first time, the people of the Niger Delta fully exercised their public voice. Incidents in the area that used to go unreported started to appear in black-and-white to be read and kept as a witness of their experiences...it became the avenue to wage the local community’s agitation for control of its natural resources. It showed in colored and black and white photographs the damage done to the environment. (231)

“The Activist” finally decides to spearhead the change he preaches by contesting for the position of Niger Delta State Governor. The oppressed people rally round him and he wins. He initiates many policies that favor the interest of the poor or lower class. He is seen in the novel as the Champion of the oppressed. Like all Marxist texts, the novel ends with the victory of the poor or lower class over the rich or upper class.

Conclusion

This study has used a Marxist approach to investigate Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*. It has examined instances of oppression and exploitation of the poor masses by those who are supposed to be their leaders.

It has also been observed in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* that the Niger Delta is partitioned into the oppressed class represented in the novel by the "The Activist", Pere, Tobi Ishaka, and Omogbemi and the oppressor represented by the Federal Military government and the Multinational Oil companies. The researcher realized that the Multinational Oil Companies Bell and O & G conduct Oil exploration to the detriment of the people's ecology. The farmlands and waters that constitute their sources of livelihood have been decimated by reckless oil exploration. When the oppressed people of Niger Delta became aware of their persecution, they revolted through various means such as the nude protest organized by Mrs. Taylor, sending of delegates to the UN, the student's protest organized by Omagbemi, the fiery publications in Patriot newspaper, the Area boys led by Pere and finally through their franchise by electing "the Activist" the Executive Governor of Niger Delta State.

The novel depicts the possibility of a triumph for the subjugated if they can rise and fight to wrench power away from the oppressor which is in line with Marxist's advocacy. But unlike most Marxist heroes, the titular character, The Activist prefers an intellectual confrontation of the forces of oppression by the oppressed using mediums such as media publications like The Patriot owned by the titular character, "The Activist" and through an election which The Activist vies, wins and automatically displaces the ruling class.

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