

# Oil, Imperialism, Underdevelopment and the Vampire State in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

Chijioke Uwasomba

## INTRODUCTION

Oil (crude) has become such an important international resource that has attracted all kinds of attention and conflicts among states and between states and citizens. For now and for a long time to come oil will continue to play a significant role in the affairs of humanity. This is because of its strategic place and role in the making of nations whether at the core or at the periphery. In the industrial North it facilitates and sustains its production activities while it is a source of large revenue to both the oil majors and their home countries on the one hand, and oil-bearing countries on the other.

In Nigeria as Turner and Badru (1984) have shown, oil has been implicated as a major factor leading to coups and counter coups in the jostle for power among the various factions of the ruling elite to establish their hegemony with a view to controlling the wealth of the nation. In these bitter struggles for the control of oil and what it offers, the ruling elite could do anything in the process. The situation is worsened by the involvement of the state in the contestation for primitive accumulation. In Nigeria, and as Olorode (2012:16) has noted, the ruling class has superintended a state where "state apparati have been used largely to entrench its hegemony at the expense of national development and of socio-economic advance of the large majority of the people". The stupendous wealth accruing from oil to both the state and the oil multinationals at the expense of the communities and their environment has spawned serious clashes with tragic consequences between the Oil Companies and the host communities of the Niger Delta in Nigeria.

Since the Anglo-Dutch Multinational Oil Corporation, Shell, struck the first Oil well in Oloibiri in the central Niger Delta (now Bayelsa state) in 1956, the communities in the region have known only poverty, pain and privation. Oil spillage which pollutes farmlands, fishing streams and ponds and the indiscriminate flaring of gas which equally poisons the air they breathe are the brutal reality of the daily lives of the people. The people of the Niger Delta claim that they do not receive any share of the Oil proceeds obtained from their land, the bulk of which is appropriated by the Nigerian government, Shell and the other Multinational Oil Corporations. They, at the initial stages embarked on mere agitations, declarations and campaigns in which issues of environmental and economic justice were raised by their organisations. The brutal repression by the state in cahoots with the Oil Companies led to a new dimension in their struggles with the introduction of militancy and kidnappings by the various groups that emerged in the politics of Oil in the area.

The focus of this chapter is an attempt to review the politics of Oil in the Niger Delta in particular and the Nigerian post-colonial state in general including the implications of this politics on national development. An explanation of the roles of the state, Oil Corporations and individuals becomes important in the understanding of the complex issues that Oil has thrown up in Nigeria. The various responses of the peoples of the Niger Delta over the years will also be taken into confederation. In all this, Tanure Ojaide's novel, titled *The Activist* provides one an anchor to examine the struggles of the Niger Delta peoples against a vampire state working with entrenched interests.

## NIGER DELTA IN HISTORY

The area known as the Niger Delta in Nigeria spans over 70,000 square kilometers. According to Olorode (2000), quoting Ogunbunmi (1999), at the geographical and ecological level, the Niger Delta is one of the foremost wetlands in the world both in terms of expanse and bio-diversity. It is also rated as having the ninth vastest drainage area in the world and the third largest mangrove forest (Oyerinde 2001).

As have been documented by Dike (1956), Ofonagoro (1979) and Okonta (2008), prior to the coming of the Europeans, the Niger Delta peoples were relatively a successful lot as they engaged in their trading activities amongst themselves and their neighbours. The area was known for its production of and trade in Palm Oil. No wonder that by 1889, the British colonial overlords renamed the area the Oil Rivers protectorate. The Berlin conference of European powers, convened in 1885 to divide Sub-Saharan Africa among themselves had effectively brought the Niger Delta Zone under British suzerainty.

George Goldie, an English merchant attracted to the Niger by the booming Palm Oil trade had by 1884 bought out Oil rival companies operating in the Niger Valley, including French competitors, amalgamating them into the Niger Delta Company. Prior to this time, the Delta middlemen had been relatively successful in confining European trading firms to the coast. But as the competition intensified for the palm-produce trade, the trading companies began to pressure the consuls appointed by their home government to regulate trade and also to protect them from “marauding natives”, to intervene and remove all remaining obstacles on their part after the deportation of King Jaja of Opopo in 1887. As earlier noted, in 1889, her majesty’s government renamed the area the Oil Rivers Protectorate.

According to Perham (1937), by 1893, the Oil Rivers Protectorate was paying its way, earning a customs revenue of  $\sum 136,000$  in that year alone. And in the same year it was renamed Niger Delta Protectorate. In 1900, the protectorate was amalgamated with the Royal Niger Company territories in the Niger Valley. In 1906, the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria amalgamated with the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos to become the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, comprising three administrative provinces: Western, Central, and Eastern.

### **THE NIGERIAN STATE AND THE NIGER DELTA REGION**

Jean Jacques Rousseau’s dictum, to wit, “man was born free but everywhere he is in chains” (1963) is apparently axiomatic and compels attention when considering the set-up in existing historical societies and states like Nigeria. Society and its attendant government provide the fitters about which Rousseau laments. Nevertheless, society and government are both necessary for the procurement of human welfare and progress. On the one hand, society provides evolutionary and resilient institutions and rules for man’s mutual machination of his many personal and environmental inadequacies. On the other hand, government ensures that institutions and their constitutive rules under girding and facilitating the said mutual dependence and co-existence, abide without willful and incessant breaches by dissenting individuals and groups for the purposes of realising the goals of collective human welfare.

However, when government and society’s constitutive rules and associated institutions seem to fail in significant respects, to ensure the protection of equal neighbours, and also avail equal or judicious access to the commonwealth of a society like Nigeria, demands are made on the state. And so, it goes without saying that government ought to ensure that institutions work and that rules are put in place for the realisation of the welfare of the people. When a government fails to discharge its duties to the citizenry creditably as has been argued by Okonta (2008), they revolt.

Historically, the Nigerian state is a creation of colonial rule and it has continued to function as the instrument of economic accumulation and a key player in its distribution. Consequently, the battle to win control of the resources of the state and its revenue has been particularly fierce on the one hand between contending political elites, and on the other between and among the various social groups and communities in the country. This struggle for “spoils” has created considerable tension and controversy, leading Nigeria’s Northern Region to threaten to secede from the federation in 1953; the Western Region in 1954; and the Eastern Region to actually secede in 1967, culminating in a civil war that was fiercely fought for three years with dire consequences for the country.

The Nigerian state, we must repeat, is involved as a participant in the accumulative processes and therefore is not neutral. This has created a big problem in the resolution of conflicts and especially those that are engendered by competition for resources. The Nigerian state has not done away with its colonial character and at every turn when there is a conflict it resorts to brutality and outright decimation of the people. From 1968 onwards, the Nigerian state has been the sole player in allocating the resources that accrue to the country. This, it does with the Oil Multinationals to the detriment of the Oil-bearing communities. Its coercive monolithism as Ake (1990) has argued gives it the impression of a strong state with immense penetrating capacity. Ake further argues:

In Nigeria, for instance, the state has little influence on the lives of the rural people. Much development that has taken place in rural communities has occurred not because of the state but in spite of it. To many rural dwellers, the state exists primarily as a nuisance to be avoided in their daily struggle for survival (Ake 1990: 38).

It is important to note that the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970 created the emergence of a new authoritarian state, centralizing both administration and fiscal resources, and forcing the people even more firmly into subject status.

As hinted earlier on, the demand for equity from the Niger Delta people did not just start now. Towards the tail end of the struggle for decolonization of Nigeria, the minorities had expressed fears of domination and exploitation in the hands of those who were programmed to inherit political power from the departing British colonial overlords. When the legitimate demands of the Niger Delta people for basic social and infrastructural developments were treated with contempt by the ne-colonial ruling class, the youths of the region decided to revolt against the Nigerian state. Thus, on February 24, 1966, Isaac Adaka Boro of blessed memory, an Ijaw student at University of Nigeria Nsukka, led a group of armed young men and proclaimed an independent Niger Delta People’s Republic to actualize the right of his people to self-actualization. His 40-man Delta Volunteer Service blew up two Oil pipe-lines belonging to Shell B.P., sacked police stations and engaged the police in a gun duel around Yenagoa (the present capital of Bayelsa state). Unfortunately, Boro and his men were defeated, charged with treason, tried, convicted and sentenced to death by the Port-Harcourt High Court. About two decades later, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) was formed, to champion the struggle for the empowerment of the Ogoni to have access to a resource which has paradoxically become an anathema to their existence.

The Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990) articulated the strategies which MOSOP would employ and explore the building and re-inventing the Ogoni nation. Other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta have also reacted in a similar vein as their Ogoni neighbours by setting

up organisations with bills of rights, charters and declarations. The KAIAMA DECLARATION, a product of the resolutions of All Ijaw Youths Conference held in 1998 was one of such numerous attempts by various groups within the Niger Delta Region to make demands on the Nigerian state and the colluding Oil Multinationals in Nigeria.

As demands for justice and equity in the Niger Delta Region intensified in the 1990s, violence against the people, their environment and their resources also increased. In 1990 as Akani (1992) has recorded, the Nigerian government in collaboration with Shell ordered the notorious Nigeria Mobile Police Force into Umuechem, in Etche community in Rivers state. Specifically, on October 30, and 31, 1990, Umuechem youths had peacefully organised a protest against Shell over the latter's destruction and neglect of their land and leaving them with only poverty and environmental pollution. Shell officials invited the anti-riot policemen to stop the protest, and the police killed about 80 people and burnt down an estimated 500 homes in Umuechem. After Umuechem, it was Ogoni where several villages were attacked, burnt down and people arrested arbitrarily while others were murdered in cold blood. In November 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight other Ogoni compatriots were hanged after a flawed judicial trial on the orders of General Abacha for the alleged murder of four Ogoni notables on May 21, 1994, at the palace of the Gbenemene (clan head of Gokana) in Giokoo town.

Earlier in 1994, Uzere community in Delta state was attacked. When Ijaw Youths proclaimed their Kiama Declaration they did not embrace violence for their peaceful campaigns for resource control. In November 1999, seven months after a new democratic regime under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, Odi community, in Bayelsa state was invaded and close to 3000 persons were killed. Choba in Rivers state, Odioma in Bayelsa state and several other Niger Delta communities fell victims of state and corporate violence. This cycle of offences against the people and their God-given natural resource created a serious security dilemma until the Y'ardua's government arranged an Amnesty Deal with the Militants.

### **THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN A CRISIS-RIDDEN STATE**

As Shatto Arthur (1977) has noted, "human suffering has been the subject matter common to literature of all cultures". Given the place of writers in society, they intervene from time to time through their creative lenses in the goings-on in their societies. Even though they may differ in their approaches, there is no doubt that they mirror, reflect and refract social realities and contradictions as they unfold. As a result many writers have been subjected to all kinds of humiliating experiences especially if and when their writings do not favour the position of the status quo- forces. At a point the works of some African American writers like Richard Wright, James Baldwin et cetera were banned by the state for their anti-status-quo stirrings. The same fate also caught up with writers like Tennessee Williams, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Graves, John Updike, Robbert Penn Warren, Kurt Vonnegut, Jean-Paul Satre, Alberto Moravia, Cartos Fuentes, et cetera, for their individual titles that were considered oppositional to the state.

Charles Larson in his book, *The Ordeal of the African Writer* (2001) shows how writers especially those from the Third World have been the butt of vile attacks by leaders of their countries. He cites as examples, the British-Indian writer, Salman Rushdie who was imposed fatwa on for his publication of *The Satanic Verses*; the Egyptian novelist, Naguib Mahfouz; Bangladesh writer, Tashima Nasreen; Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o; Zimbabwe's William Saidi; Somalia's Nuruddin Farah; Liberia's Similih M. Cordon; Camerounian René Philombe; South Africa's Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard,

Dennis Brutus, Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Bessie Head, Alex Laguma, Peter Abrahams, Richard Rive; Guinean Camara Laye; Nigeria's Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged on November 10, 1995 by the murderous Sanni Abacha government. The first victims of a corrupt state are writers and public intellectuals among other concerned citizens who take up the gauntlet to challenge the state forces. Larson informs us that when he was editing *Under African Sky* (1977), an anthology of African short stories, one of his reviewers remarked that "of the twenty-seven writers included in the anthology, nearly half of those included had been imprisoned or forced into exile" (p. 145).

According to James Gibbs, who taught at the University of Malawi from 1972 to 1978 in an article, "Of Kamuzu and Chameleons: Experiences of Censorship in Malawi", during the era of Kamuzu Banda as the president of Malawi, artists who dared the state were in danger. Gibbs' account is worth quoting profusely:

Malawi is a country in which the artist has no hope if he seeks to challenge the full might of the state and take on Kamuzuism slogan for slogan. For Malawi has her own national hero, who has established a national theatre of gigantic proportions in which he alone stars. The top-hatted hero grandly waves his flag-whisk to the thousands of women who dance before him and to the thousands of ministers and minions who dance attendance on him wherever he goes. Lines of flags (raised by convict labour in many cases) mark his progress and his softest word is picked up by microphones and blasted, through dozens of loud-speakers and thousands of radio receivers. And woe into him who ventures to lower the volume of one of them! The playwright cannot hope to contradict this Moving Shrine, the National Institution, this slice of History (Quoted in Larson 2001: 125).

The above quote is not surprising considering the nature and character of the African States. But it is heartening to note that in spite of the authoritarian disposition of the African states, the indignities, threats, humiliations suffered by the African writers, the latter have not been cowed into submission. African writers appear to know the burden facing them in their continent. Hear Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of those who have suffered in the hands of the state:

We who write in Kenya, in Africa, in the Third World, are the modern Cassandras of the developing world, condemned to cry the truth against neo-colonialists and imperialist cultures and then be ready to pay for it with incarceration, exile and even death (wa Thiong'o Ngugi 1981, quoted in Larson 2001: 114).

The foregoing clearly demonstrates the place of literature in any state including the developed ones. In neo-colonial states with the tendencies of the wielders of state power to be corrupt, authoritarian, rapacious in their attempts to primitively accumulate, writers become their first target of attacks. History has shown that writers and by extension public intellectuals are always in the forefront of activities aimed at promoting justice and development. According to Ezeigbo (2008:18) "the unrelenting persecution faced by writers all over the world is a clear indication that literature can indeed be a weapon to achieve change which bad leaders dread hence the persecution of courageous writers". In Nigeria for instance, its writers identified with their nationalist politician colleagues in the struggles of Nigerians to liberate themselves from the shackles of colonialism and imperialism as represented by the pioneers of Nigeria's writing such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ene Henshaw, Neville Ukoli, Pita Nwana, Ogali Ogali, Dennis Osadebe, et cetera. The writer will always be an activist of some sort, chronicler,

defender and awakener of his/her people's consciousness to the idiocies and follies prevalent in the society.

### **THE INSERTION OF OJAIDE AS AN ARTIST AND CRITIC OF THE NIGERIAN STATE**

Tanure Ojaide has written about sixteen poetry collections- Children of Iroko and other poems (1973), Labyrinths of Delta (1986), The Eagle's Vision (1987), The Endless Song (1989), The Fate of Vultures (1990), The Blood of Peace and Other Poems (1991), Delta Blues and Home Songs (1999), When It No Longer Matters Where You Live (1990), et cetera. Beyond these collections of poetry, he has also written a memoir titled Great Boys: An African Childhood (1998), a critical text on poetry, Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on African Poetry (1996), a collection of short stories, God's Medicine Men and Other Stories (2012) and a non-fictional work, Drawing the Map of Heaven (2012). Ojaide's second novel is The Activist which was published in 2006 and based on the activities of the Oil Multinational Companies which induce poisonous methane gas from gas flares, frequent oil spills, seismic blasts, leaking old oil pipes, blow-outs, discharge of untreated effluents directly into the bodies of water and such other oil production engagements which have rendered the evergreen wetlands poisoned, with wildlife and aquatic life dead. Human beings in the area also suffer from undiagnosed diseases and even death. Given the devastating activities of the Oil majors with the support of the Nigerian State, many writers like Ojaide from the Niger Delta have reacted to the condition of the people from the area and their ecology.

To the people of the Niger Delta, the feeling is that oil has brought so much wealth to the central government and the controllers of state power. Conversely, the oil-bearing communities are faced with poverty and death. Before the discovery of oil, the people depended on their environment to meet their national needs. The state and the Oil Corporations are primarily interested in the maximization of profit and the accumulation of capital. Campbell (2002: 45) in his writing on the Ogoni crisis and the subsequent death of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his compatriots puts it thus:

If oil is money, money is also blood. The lifeblood of a nation, circulating strongly to unify and nourish the entire national body when times are good, is sucked out by the vampire state when the oil boom collapses and the immense profits of a few must be preserved at the expense of any collective prosperity. As the lifeblood is drained from the national body, excremental oil is, left in the form of toxic waste scarring the body of the land.

As indicated earlier on, Ojaide in most of his writings is concerned about the lives of his people which the exploitative and plundering activities of the oil multinational companies are destabilising. He complains:

This area of constant rains, where we children thought we saw fish fall from the sky in hurricanes, did not remain the same. By the 1960s the rivers had been dredged to take in pontoons and even ships to enter our backyard. Shell-BP had started to feed the African Timber and Plywood Company in Sapele. Streams and marshes dried up. Rubber trees were planted in a frenzy to make money and were soon tapped to death. The Oware fish that used to jump across culverts/roads were gone. There were no more fish in most of our waters. The heat blowout in Kokori and such places imperilled our lives and our means of subsistence. (1996:122).

In an introductory essay to the book, The Poetry and Politics of Tanure Ojaide, Okome (2002:9) quotes Ojaide as saying that as an artist, he is an activist, an activist in

the struggle for the survival of his people: "I believe in the artist's activist role. Actions count to remedy a bad situation". In an environment where the Corporations are dominant the writer cannot but be an activist with a view to moulding the consciousness of his people. Writing about the dominance of corporations and how they govern our lives, Joel Bakan (2004:1) argues that:

They determine what we eat, what we wear, where we work and what we do. Increasingly, corporations dictate the decisions of their supposed overseers in government and control domains of society once firmly embedded within the public sphere.

The Niger Delta and by extension the entire Nigeria's space is under the dominance of corporations out to make as much profit as possible and in the process determine how Nigerians are governed. It is therefore not surprising that Ojaide and other writers of the Niger Delta extraction have consciously decided to write protest literature which is a reaction to the ecological crime against the Niger Delta and the tyranny of the gun represented by the authoritarian Nigerian State.

### **THE ACTIVIST AS AN EXPOSÉ OF AND CHALLENGE TO THE STATE AND THE OIL MULTINATIONALS IN NIGERIA**

The Activist is Ojaide's attempt at creating a fictional prose work out of the crisis bedeviling the Niger Delta. It is true that The Activist is Ojaide's second novel but as can be seen in the preceding section of the essay, he has been involved in the politics and creative activities that speak to the unfolding events in the oil-rich Niger Delta. Okome (2002:10) comments thus:

Ojaide's political ideas were formed in the 1960s and 1970s just after Nigeria gained independence from colonial Britain. He was not simply a passive witness of independence and the debilities that followed after self-rule, he was (and still is) a witness of the systematic degradation of the world of the Delta in which he was raised. If Clark merely painted the geography of the Niger Delta, Ojaide, more like Ken Saro-Wiwa- the slain minority and environmental rights crusader- publicly debates the fate of the Niger Delta in his poetry and critical texts. Indeed, as the critical historian of the literary development of the Niger Delta would find out, it was Ojaide who began singing of the despoliation of the environment in the Niger Delta long before any other writer.

There is no doubt that The Activist is a political novel apparently written to fulfill the charge of Ken Saro-Wiwa to Nigerian writers. Saro-Wiwa (1995: 81) has opined that:

Literature in a critical situation such as Nigeria's cannot be divorced from politics. Indeed, literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at society. They must play an intervention role... the writer must be l'homme engagé: the intellectual man of action.

The novel is woven round a Niger Delta patriot named the Activist by the author. He has lived in the United States of America for twenty-five years earning a Ph.D. As a young boy he was lucky to have survived, having been shot twice on the right knee by soldiers and mobile policemen ordered by the government and a major Oil Company to massacre his people protesting the destruction of their environment by an Oil Company. The American Ambassador who visited the site of the incident randomly selected two

young men to be sent to the United State to continue their education. That was how the Activist found himself in the United States.

When he returns home to the surprise of everybody, he takes up a teaching appointment with the Niger Delta State University. The Niger Delta that the Activist has returned to “has been scarred by the Bell Oil Company”. The situation in the Niger Delta is compounded by the collusion of the elite from the zone who are interested in lining their individual pockets at the expense of the people. The Activist shuns all the invitations of the Bell Oil company to burnish its image and instead, establishes a political and business relationship with Pere the leader of the Egba boys (also known as the Area boys). In their bunkering business which is very lucrative, the Activist and Pere pay their workers very handsomely. From the proceeds of their cartel business, Pere branches into hotel business while the Activist invests in publishing. The Activist’s newspaper is named *The Patriot* with his wife, Ebi as the Managing Director. It should be recalled that on return to Nigeria to assume duties as a lecturer the Activist has fallen in love with Ebi Emesheyi, an Art lecturer in the Niger Delta State University.

The novel is set during the military era in Nigeria with all the brutalities associated with the regime. There are decrees specifically promulgated by the government to deal with the activists, area boys and students cultists. These decrees are rebuffed and condemned by the University people. The narrator says thus:

The Universities nationwide, very mindful of their academic freedom, did not take kindly to such forays that they believed could gradually erode their traditional freedom. Those working and studying in the University considered themselves to be sacred cows and did not want to lose that status. A general meeting was called to discuss the military government’s sinister attempt to erode academic freedom and ended with a resolution condemning the government action as abrasive, unwarranted, demagogic, and unacceptable (*The Activist*, 205).

The atmosphere is suffused with authoritarian and anti-democratic values. Mrs. Tim Taylor, the leader of the Women of Delta Forum (DODEFOR) accuses the Federal Military Government and the Oil Companies of being intoxicated by the oil wealth: “The oil wealth is intoxicating the Federal Military Government and the Oil Companies and they are hunting the Niger Delta people in their lack of sobriety” (*The Activist*, P. 218).

Under this illiberal and suffocating atmosphere, many Chiefs, lecturers and other elite forces in the Niger Delta collude with the State and the Oil Corporations especially the Bell Oil Company which is at the centre of the corrosive and inhuman exploitative activities going on in the Niger Delta. Of all the Chiefs, it is only Chief Tobi Ishaka who refuses to be compromised by the Bell Oil Company and O and G. The other Chiefs are captives of corruption who share in the big pay off envelopes that the Oil Companies frequently send to the Monarch and his Chiefs. Chief Ishaka also recognizes the value of education as the key to opening up the development and fortunes of the Niger Delta. This informs his decision to encourage his son Dennis to study Petroleum Engineering in the University. He follows this up by getting him a job with the Bell’s Oil Company even though the latter decides to post Dennis to an administrative office to ensure that he will not be given the capacity to learn how to drill and explore oil.

The Activist who is desirous of change, given the strategic linkages he has established with the area boys, the students and other active forces in his society decides to contest election as the governor of the Niger Delta state. It is instructive that after realising his ambition of becoming the first democratically elected governor of the state, he and his wife visiting the United States join the protest against the World Bank and the

International Monetary Fund during their annual joint meeting in Washington. Some of their placards read: "NO TO THIEVES" "STOP IMPOVERISHING THE REST OF THE WORLD" and LET OTHERS ALSO LIVE".

As can be seen from the plot of the novel, Ojaide is through this novel exposing the exploitative activities of the Oil Companies in the Niger Delta and how the state and some key elements from the region have been colluding with these Oil Companies. The situation is such that those who present themselves as willing tools are bribed to support the rape of the Niger Delta people, their environment and their oil resource while those who disagree with the Oil Multinationals and the Nigerian state are labeled saboteurs and dealt with. The state is at the beck and call of the Oil Companies. Each time there is a blow-out and the people react to it, the state at the instance of the Oil Company concerned moves in troops to quell the protest. In the novel, there is a blow-out leading to a conflagration. Omagbemi, the President of the students' Union mobilises the students who join the community in protesting against the callousness of the Bell Oil Company. Instead of addressing the complaints of the people, the Bell Oil company alerts the government which immediately moves in troops to quell the protest killing and maiming people in the process. The narrator reports the events thus:

In their statement the police denied shooting at anybody. They only shot into the air and later shot in self-defense, they wrote in their official report of the incident. The military government swiftly issued a statement commending the police and army for bringing a quick solution to the problem in the Niger Delta. According to the government statement, the FMG could not stand by and allow social miscreants and misfits to sabotage a strategic sector of the country's economy and, bearing in mind the national security interests involved, had to solve the problem swiftly. (The Activist, P. 243).

From the beginning of the novel, the reader is jolted by the gloomy picture of things in the country. The Activist who unlike Achebe's Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* returns to the country without any pomp and ceremony at the airport by his people is appalled by the questions he is asked by the customs officer. The customs officer is obviously very corrupt. The driver taking the Activist to his hotel room tells him that: "Soja don steal all our money". "We dey inside fire" (The Activist, P.10). In the hotel where he has checked in, an attempt is made to rob him in the night. On the Activist's way from Lagos to Warri, he sees young boys and girls hawking items which will not amount to one hundred naira. The picture of the country presented is one of doom where all moral values have collapsed and those in charge of the state are involved in corruption with glee to the detriment of the society. It is not surprising that having been confronted with this ugly station, the Activist tries to do everything within his powers to capture power with a view to ameliorating the condition of his people. The people are not even happy that the Activist who instead of staying in the United States has decided to come back to Nigeria. He is seen as a queer person. His colleagues in the University cannot understand why he left America for Nigeria. His colleagues like Dr. Mukoro are requesting him to assist them to travel to the United States, a land considered to be flowing with milk and honey.

In this novel, Ojaide tries to fictionalize the crisis of oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Apparently because of the impact of this crisis on him as a member of the elite from the region, the novel leaves the terrain of fiction to that of factuality. The Boma boys represent the group of armed young men led by Isaac Adaka Boro, an Ijaw student at University of Nigeria Nsukka, who in February 1966 overran several police posts in

Rivers province in an attempt to create a new Niger Republic. The Egba boys represent the later activities of frustrated youths championed by the Egbesu boys in recent times. The Bell Oil Company obviously is Shell Petroleum Corporation whose activities have created a lot of problems for the people of Nigeria. There is no doubt that the regime being mirrored is that of Sanni Abacha, the thieving General who ruled Nigeria between 1993 and 1998 when he died under certain controversial circumstances. In the novel, Pere's friend, Owumi, tells the former that:

Many of the top military officers were involved in bunkering. The head of the military junta was himself a bunkering chieftain. He had associates who did the job for him to enjoy the huge profits. He used the bunkering business as a means of favouring loyal officers or buying the loyalty of key officers whose loyalty he needed (The Activist P. 136).

Abacha, apart from his dictatorial and murderous tendencies was involved in a lot of economic crimes as he stole the country blind.

Ojaide is suggesting through this novel that all must be involved in the struggle to reclaim the Niger Delta for the people. He seems to be saying that the forces controlling the oil resource are so strong and that to that extent the people must be organized irrespective of class, creed, gender, ethnic and other affiliations. The Activist establishes a strong relationship with the area boys, the boma boys, the students' movement and the Women of Delta Forum (WODEFOR). This battling collectivity recognises the power of women in the march to change the Niger Delta. It is this strategic linkage and organisation that make it possible for the Activist to become the governor of the Niger Delta state.

The implicit message that Ojaide tries to pass across in the novel has to do with the intricate and complex relationship existing between the state, imperialist forces represented by the Oil Corporations and the colluding elite. The Niger Delta forces including the area boys "realised that somehow America had joined hands with their local enemies, the Oil Companies and the government whose activities destroyed the people and their environment by spreading fire all over the oil-producing region" (The Activist, P.188). It therefore presupposes that to dislodge this chain successfully will require an understanding of its operations. With the Activist's background and understanding of how the international system works to undermine peripheral formations, he comes back home to raise and build a social movement for change. While in the United States and even when he has become the governor of the Niger Delta state, he participates in the picketing of the Bretton Woods Institutions and the Group of Seven in their meetings. These imperialist groups have worked tirelessly to deepen the dependency paradigm in the world.

The above is achieved because of the collusion between perfidious internal agents and their Western masters to sustain their hegemonic interests. This has been the history of the world for sometime now. Nugugi wa Thiong'o who has written a lot about this relationship puts it this way:

First it has been the factor of foreign invasion, occupation, and control, and, second, the internal factor of collaboration with external threat. Whether Western slavery or slave trade, under colonialism today or under neo-colonialism, two factors have interacted to the detriment of our being. The greedy Chief or other elements bred by the new colonial overlords, collaborated with the main external imperialist factor. The storm repeats itself more painfully under neo-colonialism (1993: 78).

Ojaide's the Activist walks against these mines to assume political power. All in all, it is meet to state that The Activist is a novel about exile, about corruption of the elite, about corporations in peripheral formations with emphasis on Nigeria, about Military dictatorship in Nigeria, imperialism with its complex institutions. These have ensured and sustained underdevelopment in Nigeria.

The writer tries to show the possibility of change if correct and practical strategies and tactics are adopted by social movements working strenuously for a change of the status quo.

#### REFERENCES

- Achebe, Chinua. *No Longer At East*. London: HEB. 1960.
- Akani, Christian. "The State, Private Property and the study of Nigeria". Unpublished M.Sc. Thesis, Department of Political Science and Administrative Studies, University of Port-Harcourt, 1992.
- Ake, Claude, "Sustaining Development on the Indigenous Papers", *The Long Term Perspective study of Sub-Saharan Africa: Vol.3*, Washington DC, World Bank, PP.7-21, 1990.
- Bakan, Joel. *The Corporation-The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Toronto: VIKING CANADA, 2004.
- Campbell, Marion. "Witnessing Death: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni crisis" *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.5, No.1, (2002): 35-49.
- Dike, Kenneth. *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*. London: Oxford University Press 1956.
- Ezeigbo, Theodora Akachi. "Artistic Creativity: Literature in the Service of Society". *Inaugural Lecture Series 2008*, University of Lagos.
- Larson, Charles. *The Ordeal of the African Writer*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2001.
- Ofonagoro, Walter I. *Trade and Imperialism in Southern Nigeria 1881-1929*. New York: Nok, 1979.
- Ogunbunmi, Kayode. "Spreading the Struggle: A Review of the Human Ecosystem of the Niger Delta" in ERACTION, January-March, 1999, P.P. 6-7.
- Ojaide, Tanure. *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays in African Poetry*. North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The Activist. Lagos: Farafina, 2006.
- Okome, Onookome. "Introduction" Tanure Ojaide: The Poet Laureate of the Niger Delta" in *Okome Onookome ed. Writing the Homeland: The Poetry and Politics of Tanure Ojaide*. Bayreuth African Studies, 2002.
- Okonta, Ike. *When Citizens Revolt: Nigerian Elites, Big Oil and the Ogoni Struggle*. Ofirima Publishing House, 2008.
- Olorode, Omotoye. "The Crises in the Oil Producing Communities in Nigeria" in *Boiling Point* eds. Raji Wumi et al. Lagos: CDHR, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_ “Law and (Social) Transformation”. *A Keynote Lecture Delivered at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of O.A.U. Faculty of Law on July 11, 2012 at Ile-Ife.*

Oyerinde, Olaitan. “Oil Disempowerment and Resistance in the Niger Delta” in Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Nigerian State. eds. Omotoye Olorode et al, Lagos: CDHR, 2001.

Perham, Margery. *Native Administration in Nigeria.* London: Oxford University Press, 1937.

Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *Discourses on the Origin of Inequality among men and the Social Contract.* England: Union Gerald Editions, 1963.

Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary.* Harmonds worth: Penguin, 1995.

Shatto, Arthur. *The Novel of Contemporary Experiences in Africa.* London: HEB, 1977.

Turner, Terisa and Badru, Pade “Oil and Instability: Class Contradictions and the 1983 Coup in Nigeria”. *Journal of African Marxists.* No.7, March (1984): 4-21.

wa Thiong’o Ngugi. *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary.* London: HEB, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Moving the Centre: the Struggle for Cultural Freedom:* London: HEB, 1993.

**Dr.Chijioke Uwasomba, Ph.D.,  
Department of English,  
Obafemi Awolowo University,  
Ile-Ife, Nigeria.**