

Political Power and Intellectual Activism in Tanure Ojaide's The Activist.

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Abstract

In the context of the political violence and socio-economic contradictions in the Niger delta region of Nigeria, which are fuelled by the inept activities of the ruling class and the multinationals, this study examines Tanure Ojaide's ideo-aesthetic predilections and views as Nigeria grapples with the tragedies of post-colonialism. Ojaide undertakes this artistic reconstruction in his recent work, *The Activist*. Ojaide's *The Activist* is a contemporary novel that deals with post-independence disillusionment about oil politics, ethnic marginalisation and environmental predation in Nigeria. The title of the novel evokes political activism or participation, which is needed in order to change Nigeria's landscape. Intellectual activism is central in effecting Nigeria's transformation. Intellectual activism deals with the ideological and political education or engagement necessary to raise the awareness of the masses about changing an unjust order. This sort of activism is relevant since acquiring political power by the intelligentsia is vital in combating the ills in Nigeria. Therefore to alter Nigeria's moribund politics, intellectual activism is a sine qua non.

“Power (unless it be the power of intellect or virtue)
has ever the greatest attraction for the lowest natures...”
--- Charles Dickens, in *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 489.

“If man is ever to solve that problem of politics in particular
he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic”
--- Friedrich Schiller, in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man
in a Series of Letters*, p. 9.

Introduction

The Activist is a political novel with social realist ideals. It reconstructs the plight of the downtrodden and marginalised in the Niger delta – and Nigeria by extension. Also, the novel refracts the destruction done to the Nigerian environment by the multinationals in partnership with the political class. The Activist, who is the protagonist of the novel, is a

returnee – he is a symbol of the intellectualism, patriotism and vision needed to effect transformation in the Niger delta. As a stock character, his characterisation in the novel evokes wholesome change in the Niger delta region of Nigeria, and Nigeria in general. He shows such change to be attainable through change in the dynamics of political power and the engagement of intellectual activism, which is a reasoned form of political activism capable of provoking ideo-political engagement and education in the masses in order to overturn justice in society. The Activist returns home after studies abroad and becomes disenchanted with the status quo, so he jumps on the political bandwagon to effect change and development in his environment. His actions are in parallel with other well-crafted characters in the novel, who are equally agents of societal transformation. The Activist flung off this ideal by participating in, and winning, election as governor of Niger Delta State in order to bring healthy change. The Activist's political victory was the first time anyone was elected to that position in the state – this is historic: “The Activist whose campaign had drowned the other eleven candidates' voices comfortably won the governorship race and became the first elected governor of the state in all its history” (318). Furthermore, his characterisation contrasts with other mindless intellectuals in the novel as well as the political elite, whose leadership style has failed the Niger delta community and the Nigerian state. In retrospect, *The Activist* is a well-weaved tale of failure of political leadership in present-day Nigeria, where oil politics has held the masses down for a long time – and how to avert this bungling system through the coalescence of intellectualism and populist-oriented political leadership.

Ten decades after the amalgamation of its separate power blocs, Nigeria is still tottering on the precipice. To say that Nigeria is a nation in dire straits is no news; it is a verifiable fact. Researchers have said that the constitutive ethos of Nigeria was predicated upon endemic, imperial violence against the constituting nationalities. It was designed to put a spanner into the cultural, political, economic and social works of this nation, which is still groping in the dark with the bangs and pangs of slavery and colonialism – and recently neocolonialism. As the twin evils of slavery and colonialism left the centre stage, there emerged contemporary postcolonial realities. No matter the hue of politics or political

power in Nigeria, it has spawned virtually the same crushing effects: political instability, socio-economic misery, environmental devastation, ecological dissonance and ethnic crisis, *inter alia*. The social contradictions in Nigeria are more pronounced in the Niger delta region, the oil producing area, where the nation's wealth is deposited. The oppressive system in this region usually provokes incessant conflicts and political violence. According to a leading Nigerian professor of sociology, Inya Eteng:

The fundamental contradiction is indeed most pronounced in the oil-bearing communities of the Niger delta minority enclave from where the country's oil wealth is generated. This fact is well known and highly acknowledged by the appropriating Nigerian state in power, the expropriating multinational oil companies and the expropriated oil bearing communities'. (1997:4)

It is in view of the above backdrop that Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* was crafted so as to paint the inanities of misrule, and to use art to demonstrate an alternative means to political power, which finds resonance in the turf of intellectual activism.

The purpose of this groundbreaking novel is to elevate politics to its wholesome state – to develop the idea of politics as a patriotic vocation. Of all the political novels set in Nigeria, none but *The Activist* has so picturesquely reconstructed the plights of the masses that are perennially bludgeoned to submission by the system of command, and who obey and are seasonally plundered by the federal government of Nigeria in cahoots with the multinationals. Some political novels set in Nigeria like *A Man of the People*, *Season of Anomy*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, and *The Man Died*, among others, do address the postcolonial tragedies in the Nigerian body-politic, but it is *The Activist* that has captured in the language of modern arrangement the politics of ecological cum environmental violence and socio-economic oppression in the Niger delta, and Nigeria by extension. The ideo-aesthetic antecedent of this artistic penchant in the novel is underwritten by the philosophy behind Ojaide's poetic vocation. Ojaide's art is anchored on ideas of redeeming man and his environment from the clutches of devastation, as well as finding an alternative cultural system within the present national mess that Nigeria

faces. In this vein, Aderemi Bamikunle's statement adds credence to this:

His poetry (art) takes off from the present in desperate search for values to redeem its malaise. The search takes him to the immediate past in the history of colonialism, and beyond that into the pre-colonial ancestral history and culture... he believes it is possible to move history forward through progressive regeneration. (my parenthesis; 1991:81)

The focus on Tanure Ojaide shows that his works are not mere artistic pastiche; they uncompromisingly reflect a genuine mediation in the realm of social facts – particularly in the Niger delta. This is the trademark of his artistic enterprise.

For Ojaide, works of art should accommodate socio-historical experience, mediating the goings-on in the body politic through literature. Thus, as Ojaide observes: “Literature has to draw attention to the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights” (1996:42). As the novel refracts the conjunctures in society and transports them to the fictive world, it achieves what Chidi Amuta calls “mediation” (1989:81), the ability of literature, particularly the novel, to participate in the drama of social realities and change. This is Ojaide's commitment in this novel. *The Activist* is a present-day Nigerian novel, which is timely as Nigeria trudges in the sleazy minefield of environmental injustice and an oppressive political landscape. The devastation of the Niger delta environment by the multinationals - represented by Shell, Texaco, Mobile, Chevron and others, as well as the political class, has been a major motif of Ojaide's art, as is demonstrated in *The Activist*. The ultimate message of this fictive work is that when political change is sought through reasoned, intellectual activism, the social space is made whole.

Politics and activism is recycled in the mill of *The Activist* and the upshot is a radical, revolutionary Fanonian consciousness aimed at eradicating the exploitative order for a progressive and environmentally friendly politics. Following this, *The Activist* is a work of art committed to cultural nationalism and resistance. It problematises the brutality in

the Niger delta, which is the setting of the novel. Oil is the cardinal reason for this brand of politics in the region. The politics of oil in the Niger delta cost the martyred author-activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the other Ogoni eight their lives; it is responsible for the ethnic tensions, wars, mass killings, rise of ethnic militias and “ecological imperialism”, to borrow Alfred Crosby’s locution from the title of his landmark work of 1986.

Ecological imperialism is a form of colonialism aimed at damaging as well as exploiting the environment and ecology of the colonised. Thus, in the “ecological war”, to borrow Saro-Wiwa’s phrase, whoever holds political power should dominate the equation of change. The level of poverty, squalor and degradation to which the Niger delta is subjected by the powers that be, are captured poignantly in the words of Ray Ekpou: “the story of the Niger delta is the story of a paradox, grinding poverty in the midst of vulgar opulence. It is the case of a man who lives on the banks of a river and washes his hands with spittle. It is the case of a people who live on the farm and die of famine” (2004:10). These images of lack, privation and domination re-affirm Ojaide’s artistic insights into the real world in the Niger delta as well as Nigeria, which *The Activist* refracts in the form of a novel. In underscoring this position, it is evident that “... the literary work manifests man’s understanding of human experience” (Strauch 1982:42). Ojaide has reconstructed the imbalances in the Niger delta. At this juncture, we shall look at the theoretical framework of this study, as it will offer insights into the conceptual paradigms that shape this discourse.

Conceptual Framework

This study is predicated on these binary concepts: intellectual activism and political power. Both are like Siamese twins: separate them and there is a risk of at least mangling the dynamics of this study, or losing its import. This is why this discourse is forged in this fashion – to bring to the fore the essentials of Ojaide’s concern in the novel.

Intellectual activism is essentially the ideological and political education or engagement needed to sensitise as well as galvanise the masses about the nature of politics in their environment; through this process, the masses could change the stifling political leadership in their environment. And political power amounts to political mandate or the

ability to impact the political leadership of a society.

No human society is devoid of class struggle. Class struggle is a rectilinear function of an unending struggle for political and economic power between the ruling and working class in a given society. This conjuncture is mediated through power relations – groups involved in a contest for dominance. In a class society, such as is engendered by capitalism or power politics, the struggle for any form of control between the ruling class or powerful class and the proletariat class can only be resolved through political revolution or activism. However, while the economic is the most fundamental factor determining every relationship, political revolution or activism is the most effective means of bringing about societal transformation in an exploitative social space. To this end, the most desirable social landscape will emerge when the masses wrestle for power with the ruling class. This naturally brings about a just and equitable society. The concept of political power is quite teleological – its control ultimately brings about transformation. Through history, man has contended with changing society for the better; this has preoccupied the minds of philosophers, artists, statesmen, and social scientists among others. This change can only come about when the mode of production of material life, which technically determines the ontological shape of other processes of life, is altered. Thus, literary and artistic productions are determined by the architecture of the modes of production that shape material life.

Furthermore, since the base determines the superstructure – where artistic, intellectual and political activities are deposited, to use the Marxist aesthetics, the artist has to engage in the political/societal debate so as to change the material configuration of society. The writer (artist) cannot be separated from the antagonistic class relations at work in such a society. The artist is a part of society; he belongs it. Therefore, an artist or writer in society can, through his works, offer critical appraisal, constructive criticism and informed perspectives on the existing political situation and thereby mould or redirect his society's beliefs, values, ideals, politics and culture. Herein resides the meaning of intellectual activism: a reasoned form of political activism nuanced with political and

ideological education.

Tanure Ojaide is famous for his commitment to using poetry to bring the travails of the Niger delta people to light. But in order to realistically portray Nigeria's postcolonial, he makes use of the novel. This is because it is the form that paints the most vivid, realistic and palpable picture of human existence. According to Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*, the distinctiveness of this genre is its implicit utilisation of a realistic epistemology (1972:13). Therefore, the novel is the most potent platform on which the societal ills of the Niger delta can be depicted. This is what determines Ojaide's choice of the novel – to chronicle the present as part of the historical realities that have shaped the plights of the masses in the delta, where the masses are in want in the midst of plenty. His intention dovetails with what Alan Swingewood observed in *The Novel and Revolution*, which is that the realistic chronicling of present social facts as part of human history is most viably achieved through the novel (1977:266).

After writing fourteen volumes of poetry, Ojaide decided to use the novel genre to more clearly portray of the living conditions of the marginalised deltans and the environmental neglect of this region. Therefore, Ojaide adopted the novel in order to most cognizably reconstruct of the meltdown of the Niger delta environment; this is arguably opposed to his first love, poetry, which does not give precedence to the enforcement of the real, but rather the spontaneous (Breton 1972:14). In *Homecoming: Essays on Africa and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, Ngugi speaks of the relevance of a writer's environment to his work: "A writer responds, with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time" (47). The socio-historical dynamics of this fictive work is redolent with the obnoxious practices of the Nigerian state and the multinationals in postcolonial Nigeria – of which the Niger delta is microcosm – where oil is at the root of all unacceptable practices.

Political power is at the heart of finding alternative order so as to winnow out the exploitative regimen in place in the Niger delta, and Nigeria as a whole. The concept of
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political power is an integral aspect of this study, which is an indispensable part of the philosophical fulcrum on which *The Activist* rests. In Ojaide's judgment, a good work of art should champion the cause of the exploited in society. From the perspective of literary activism or revolutionary aesthetics, "the political criterion of excellent art is art which serves the struggle of the people against oppression" (Onoge 1985:44). In order for a writer to participate in the political process of the day, he has to make sure his art is tinged with politics; every work of literature is a commitment to a specific political ideology, and every writer is a writer in politics (Ngugi 1981: xii). Literature cannot stand detached from the developments taking place in a social milieu; its deep-seated social characters, derived largely from the conjunctures and events in the social sphere, necessarily imbue it with partisanship. This is in tandem with Amuta's view that "... writers are implicated in the larger struggle which defines political life in wider society" (54). Put simply, literature is a product of socialized human experience.

Literature as Human Experience: Economic, Ideological and Social Imperatives

The question whether literature is a refraction of social facts or mere exercise in aesthetics of language, has been a contested. There are opposing schools of thought on this issue, all struggling to demonstrate the reason behind their philosophical stance. The limits of this study will not permit an investigation of such a depth. However, the formalist school champions the "art for art's sake" thesis, which states that works of art have no direct relationship with social facts. The other school of thought called the pragmatic school, looks at art as an end; this is because for the practitioners of this school, art is the ultimate instrument used to change people's perception and ideology in a given social space – art has to be affective. This school questions the insensitivity of the formalist school, which does not make room for social realities to find resonance in artistic creation. It is in consideration of the implausibility and limitations of formalist criticism, essentially on the heels of the demands of what Frantz Fanon calls the "fighting phase" (third dimension) that pragmatist criticism is upturned. In the Fanonian theory of colonial and postcolonial literature, this phase distils when "... the native turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting phase literature, a

revolutionary literature, and a national literature’’ (1965:179). Besides, this phase in Fanon’s theory resonates with Ngugi’s position, which Amuta sees as “‘intense sense of progressive social commitment’’ (1989:96). It is therefore imperative to factor in social facts in works of art so as to illuminate people’s path to a proper understanding of the goings-on in their society. On this strength, literature for the pragmatists, should mediate conflict between a dominant discourse and a local reality (Ashcroft 2000:1). *A priori*, for Ojaide, political matters should resonate with literature.

The social function of literature as a participant in the evolution and development of society has been problematic. This has actually thrown up the question of whether or not literature or art in general has any utilitarian value. Apart from the aesthetic function of literature, it equally has some social, political and cultural functions. In the view of Theo Vincent, “‘Literature is a great discipline. It makes you understand the world in a holistic sense, perhaps as no other subject does. Sometimes, literature can comfort you; it can calm you; it can open up the world, even its numinous essence to you, just the way religion does. So, in moments of anarchy, there are two things that come to your mind – the Bible and literature. So, literature ... is a very serious subject, very enriching’’ (2003:3). Literature as a facet of social institutions is part of the machinery of change, education and ideological persuasion in a given environment.

In *The Activist*, the plausibility of Ojaide’s narrative and historicity is founded on the contemporariness of the events, situations and conjunctures in the novel. To an extent, the novel could be mistaken for a sociological tale in view of its historiographic underpinnings. Following this, most of the places mentioned in the novel like Itsekiri, Abuja, Ughelli, Orhobo and others are real places, some of the organisations mentioned like OPEC, CLO and others are actual organizations, and some of the things or circumstances reconstructed in this novel bear semblance with the realities in Nigeria. For example, Shell and other multinationals are represented in the novel as Bell Oil Company and O&G Company. Nigeria, which is mentioned fairly often in the novel, shores up the historicity of *The Activist* as a piece of fiction based on truth. The activities

of the Egbesu Boys and sundry agents of change in the real world of the Niger delta, dovetail with the activities of Delta Cartel, Egba Boys, student unions and other institutions in the novel that are the vanguard for change in the novel. The choking landscapes as seen in the novel and real life are largely responsible for activism in both worlds. Thus,

This activism can be attributed to frustration (on the part of the people of the region) arising from both state and oil companies' negligence and destruction of the Niger delta's ecology, which is the basic structure that supports life in the region, as elsewhere. It may be said that the struggles by the people of the region have been predicated on certain issues, namely: their exclusion or marginalisation in terms of access to oil revenue; their struggle for greater access to resource sharing (known in Nigerian parlance as resource control); environmental degradation; and egregious human rights violation. (Ojakorotu 2008: 93)

The lived experience described above finds a counterpart in the conjunctures in the novel. The novel in this regard takes on the Gorkyian toga, offering rare insight into the process of socio-historical reconstruction in its narrative. Understandably, Ojaide's art is a product of his environment. In order to effect change in the body politic, Ojaide crafted the persona of a returnee, who returns from a distant travel to explore what modernity, politics, technological development and ethnicity – resulting principally from oil exploration in the Niger delta – have done to his roots and to the deltans. This intriguing connection between the situation reconstructed in this novel and real issues in the Niger delta, brings to light the potential of literature to engage with the issues of real life.

From an ideological perspective, *The Activist* embodies the dominant ideological conflicts in Nigeria – that of oil politics, ethnic marginalisation, class domination, and environmental politics, among other factors. These are some of the variables that shape the Nigerian society and its politics. In turn, ideology mediates literature; ideology is actually inscribed within the novel's ambit. Hence, the radical thematic preoccupation of Nigerian writers' like Ojaide elucidates the evils of post-colonialism. Therefore,

the wastage of the wealth accruing from the oil boom and the resultant moral atrophy that permeated all strata in the society was an open invitation to a literature that was unashamedly revolutionary in an ideological sense. This, inevitably, led to the emergence on the literary scene of a new generation of young evolutionary writers whose preoccupation was the indictment of the self-indulgent political elite, and the general re-orientation of society and the sensitisation of its psyche. (Tsaaior 2006:417).

Other Nigerian writers have adumbrated ideological patterns similar to those in Ojaide's work, although they have done so in different ways. Emmanuel Obiechina notes that Nigerian writers

should have a special allegiance to the downtrodden in the Nigerian society, to the socially handicapped, to the women, the children, the unemployed, the sick; all those who are not able to fight their own battles. The writer should put on his armour and charge into battle in defence of the defenceless. It is my view that the writer in Nigeria of today has to take his position against the oppression of the people, all forms of brutalities, and of unwarranted violence against them masses. (1988:4)

From the above, it could be gleaned that the Niger delta environment – made comatose by the conduct of the multinationals and the Nigerian government – is an area that Nigerian writers should focus on, as Ojaide has done in *The Activist*. He has used his artistic prowess, and the knowledge gained from having come from that area himself, to reconstruct the inhumanity and despoliation to which the Niger delta community and its inhabitants are being subjected.

The Activist is therefore a burlesque of the postcolonial politics in Nigeria. The situations and circumstances described in *The Activist* are sheer simulacra of the realities in Nigeria. The social anomie portrayed in *The Activist*, is also seen in the Niger delta, as is echoed by Mayowa:

Violence in Nigeria can be explained from environmental and economic perspectives. It draws its origin from very harsh living

conditions, exclusion from political participation and the brutal experience of ethno-communal skirmishes, which have recently become a feature of life in Nigeria... the state has promoted communal violence, and it also reveals the logical contradictions of communal violence in Nigeria. (2001:196)

In the light of the above, the “celebrated Nigerian poet-scholar Tanure Ojaide fires a salvo by bringing us *The Activist*, a provocative novel that articulates to readers the irony of oil exploitation in modern Nigeria... *The Activist*... includes a mission to change the livelihood of his impoverished Niger delta community...” (Okoro 2007:1).

Prospecting for Intellectual Leadership

Like most concepts these days, the category of the intellectual is highly contested – there are many divergent theories about what an intellectual is. In spite of the mountain of theories, large number of books, essays, and research works being churned out, there is no coherent, monolithic theory of what constitutes an intellectual. Engaging in the theory of intellectuals would rob us of the meat of this discourse. However, in *The Activist*, we are basically concerned with a brand of intellectuals: activist intellectuals. This group of intellectuals usually criticizes a repressive and oppressive social order. Because of their stance in society, they are seen as outsiders, hence their views are in conflict with the philosophy of the political class. The place of intellectual leadership in an oppressive world cannot be glossed over. It is the balm that soothes the aching condition of the masses, and gives them the needed consciousness to better their world. Despite the attacks made against the intellectuals in the postmodern era – that they do not possess the power to engage with universal values – and the breaking of this term into diverse typologies, the place of intellectual leadership is necessary to our world.

In this vein, the first noteworthy work that decries the universal position of the intellectual was Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, which argues against the universal position of intellectuals. In this book, attempts are made to argue that the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment – which had previously legitimated the idea of the monolithic nature of the intellectuals – have undergone a process of decline and

fragmentation in the postmodern era of the late twentieth century. Thus, the masses no longer need the intellectual to know the world around them. Other typologies that came in the wake of this attempt include the Foucauldian “universal” and “specific” intellectual schools of thought as well as Gramsci’s “traditional” and “organic” intellectual schools of thought, among other sub-schools – all aimed at trivialising the significance of universal leadership of intellectuals. However, the intellectual for Sartre is “someone who becomes aware of the opposition, both within himself and within history, between a search for practical truth (with all the norms it implies) and a ruling ideology (with its system of traditional values)” (1973: 246). The intellectual’s consciousness of this societal contradiction is what Hegel calls “unhappy consciousness” (in Sartre 1973:243). And this “unhappy consciousness” is the “necessary possibility”, to borrow Derrida’s phrase, of the intellectuals. The desire to change unpleasant an order has been the role of the intellectual; this is essentially what informs Ojaide’s *The Activist* – he uses art to espouse an alternative order in the Niger delta, and Nigeria in general.

The Activist is in contradistinction to other intellectuals in the novel; Dr. Mukoro and Prof. Tobore Ede are in sharp contrast to the Activist. Dr. Mukoro cannot see the reason that the Activist left the United States, with its seeming opportunities, to come back to Nigeria, a nation reeling with privation and malaise (27). And Prof. Ede is a friend of the multinationals who uses his position as a professor at Delta State University to oppress his community. When a fire engulfs Roko Village as a result of an outburst of crude oil, and the villagers plan a protest in the wake of the nonchalant attitude of Bell Oil Company, the company use Prof. Ede to stem the tide. As an intellectual, he employs rhetoric, persuasion and double-speak to pacify the students who were poised to protest against the ignoble attitude of the multinationals:

The oil companies heard of the proposed protest. They had ears in town and in the university campus. They had dealt with many protests before and felt this would not be difficult to abort. In their meeting on how to handle the impending emergency, they decided to send Bell Oil’s community development officer to pacify the student group... Professor Tobore Ede, on a two-year

leave from the university, came to campus with the task of pacifying the restless students... “The villagers set their village on fire because they wanted to extort money from Bell Oil Company ...” the community development officer proclaimed. (177-178)

Even the law Professor, Prof. Kokoba, who was Bell Oil Company’s former development officer, involves himself in the espionage, violence, exploitation and double-speak in order to be compensated by the multinationals at the peril of his community. Before the Roko Village fire incident, the villagers saw the need to protest because of a blowout in the village; besides, pipes crisscrossed the village, thereby putting it in a serious danger. In this instance, the multinationals use Prof. Kokoba to assuage the feelings of the villagers by telling them the village was safe. And since Prof. Kokoba is an intellectual, whom they respected, the villagers bought into his position on this very precarious and important matter.

When the villagers had protested many years ago about these many pipelines crisscrossing their village, the company bribed their chief twenty miles away in Warri and sent the community development officer, Professor Kokoba, to tell them that they were safe. The villagers doubted they were safe but there was nothing they could do after their own son they had contributed to send to study law in England, then a professor, assured them that they were safe. (176)

The brazenness of the intellectual class in fanning the embers of corruption and above all, their complicity in encouraging oil politics, which relegates the minorities to the back-burner, are what the Activist sees as the bane of his society. Even the vice-chancellor of Niger Delta State University is involved in this ugly system, as are some of the famous university lecturers.

What we see in this kind of operation is that those who are supposed to be standard-bearers for their nation through high quality of their intellectual and human capital, have been made venal and prostrate through bribery and other forms coercion by the government and multinationals – depicted in the novel as Bell Oil Company, Sina, Brotal and O&G Company. Also, ASUNU (Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities),

which ought to be a beacon of hope, light and intellectualism, is an accomplice in this buccaneering.

The oil companies had their spies in the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUNU) and a feedback on government policies backfiring and not achieving the intended results. They met, as they always did in a clandestine manner, and agreed to look for other ways to drastically reduce the influence of the radical elements on campuses by pumping more money to stuff their mouths, if possible. They set their managers the assignment of looking for creative ways of silencing known and possible critics with huge amounts of local money. (206)

In the novel, the Activist brings to mind the nameless protagonist of Ralph Elision's *The Invisible Man*, and (though he is not nameless) to Ayi Kwei Armah's Baako in *Fragments*. He also sheds light on the personality of Odili in Achebe's *A Man of the People*. These characters all foreshadow change and intellectual leadership in a world ravaged by ineptitude and disorder, both of which are crystalised in the postcolonial disillusionment in the Nigerian political class. According to Ngugi, "the disillusionment with the ruling elite is to be found in recent works of most African writers" (47). This is basically what Tanure Ojaide, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngozi Adichie, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Wole Soyinka, Ousmane Sembene, Oswald Mtshali and other writers have articulated in their works, which are all set in postcolonial Africa, and focus on its political turmoil.

The Activist, who represents the voice of change and intellectual leadership in the novel, serves as a contrast to the brand of elite politics that other intellectuals in the novel like Profs. Ede, Mukoro and Kokoba represent. The Activist's ideological wavelength is in congruence with Ngugi's position in *Homecoming*:

I believe that the African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organization that will free the manacled spirit and energy of our people so we can build a new country and sing a song. (50)

The idea crystallized in this passage is that the African (Nigerian) social space in which this “new song” is sung, necessitates intellectual activism so as to bring about change. Predominantly, *The Activist* presents the determination of the proletariats not to be stopped by the realities that the activities of the multinationals, the government and the elite throw at them.

The novel reads like Ojaide’s response to some critics who accuse him of overt sentimentality and pessimism regarding changing the political structure in the Niger delta. *The Activist* unearths Ojaide’s ideals and his aesthetic preoccupation with the total liberation of Nigeria from postcolonial tragedies. To change this smothering landscape, political power, sustained and nurtured by intellectual leadership is required. His concept of leadership involves the rise of the down-trodden who must take up the mantle of leadership. To make good the Activist’s commitment to enlightenment, good character and intellectual leadership in politics in his social matrix, he considers raising the standard of education, should he be elected as the governor of the state. This is for him the bedrock of societal development and renaissance. To this end he says, “...Should I be elected, I will make improving higher education one of my cardinal pursuits” (314).

Contesting the Nigerian Political Space: *The Activist* as Political Novel

History bears out the capacity of political novels to shape human civilisation and development. For example, Apartheid South Africa was a hotbed of suppression of political fiction. A perfunctory observation of this period, paints an unsavoury picture of state repressive laws, fiats and enactments that were aimed at frustrating politically oriented fiction. And apart from legislating fiction out of existence in Apartheid South Africa, writers were sometimes incarcerated, killed or exiled, apparently because the state machinery feared that the power and influence of fiction would subvert their control of the state apparatuses and political rein. This period generated the fiction of Alex La Guma, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Oswald Mtshali, among others, whose art basically gauged the political temperature of that moment. The recent instantiation of this tendency in

Pakistan is a case in point. Pakistan has no wholesale ban on non-fiction, but does have such a ban on some fiction because of its capacity to revolutionize people's perception of the inner workings of the state. Nineteenth-century Russia was in the main, a socio-economic backwoods. From this grisly landscape emerged politically motivated writers who used their art to wrestle power with the powers that be. This era produced writers like Dostoevsky and Turgenev among others. Books such as *Writers in Politics* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change* by Michael Hanne, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa* by Arthur Gakwandi, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* by Emmanuel Ngara and *Art and Revolution: Writings on Literature, Politics, and Culture* by Leon Trotsky, etc celebrate the significance of literature (the novel) in contributing to the political transformation of society. Whether considered as meddlesomeness or artistic utopia, the point remains that the novel is a potent tool in the reconstruction of society for human freedom and environmental wholesomeness.

A political novel is the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of the political developments in a given society in its aesthetization. It is an art-form that rallies against arbitrary modes of governance. In Nigeria, the political novel had as its primer Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, which gauges the political firmament of the Establishment and the heartbeat of the Nigerian military in politics – which it prefigures. Following in Achebe's footsteps was Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, a map of animated anti-Establishment derring-do. After these fictive pieces, came *Anthills of the Savannah* by Achebe, *Destination Biafra* by Buchi Emecheta, *Waiting for an Angel* by Helon Habila, *Arrows of Rain* by Okey Ndibe, *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Ngozi Adichie, and other works that see politics as a major social institution that should be given expression in reconstructing postcolonial realities in Nigeria. In one form or another, these novels, adumbrate the military engagement in politics in Nigeria, the fallout of civil wars and the tendency of the political class to hold on to power in order to perpetually hold the masses down. But of all these works, none has portrayed the Niger delta's contradictions in a more vivid and telling way than *The Activist*. The exploitative nature of the multinationals

represented in the novel as Bell Oil and O&G Company, who are tenants to the deltans and the asphyxiating environment that their activities have made possible, are given a silhouette in Ikhido Ikheloa's review of the novel: "The hell-delta of Nigeria rages on without succour, its angry landlords refusing to be consoled, as their termite-tenants rape them and their land repeatedly and without mercy..." (2007:2).

Ojaide has richly illustrated the main reason for the exploitative mechanisms in the Niger delta. This is made possible despite certain draconian decrees and enactments that have made the federal government of Nigeria the sole decider of how oil revenue should be disbursed. This is the revenue formula – whoever has oil, even if it is deposited under their soil, the oil revenue accruable must be taken care of by the federal government, who is more or less a leviathan in the eyes of the people. This is part of what the protagonist of the novel, the Activist refers to as he chats with Ebi during their visit to Ebi's auntie, Torukpa at Okwagbe, as a facet of postcolonial politics and "communal anomy" (156). Basically, part of the erosion of culture where people owned oil deposited in their land is the colour of politics at work in the Niger delta:

Chief Tobi Ishaka took a long look at the situation in the Niger Delta area and saw no simple solution to the community's problem in the short term. He saw no easy way that the minority groups would seek for a political solution to the revenue sharing formula of the country. The majority groups were rivals and even hostile to each other, but they united on one side, and that was in ganging up against the minority groups from whose area ninety-five percent of the nation's revenue (sic) derived. Once the majority groups ganged together, they possessed the power of a monster. Add their power to that of the military government and the multinational companies, one could imagine the obscene force that the minority Niger Delta had to contend with. These big powers were not invincible, but it would take so much effort to defeat them... (160-161)

This passage points a flambeau at the character of Chief Ishaka, who is seen from his introduction in the novel as a highly political character. His revolutionary disposition in the novel is what is needed to change the Niger delta landscape, where neo-colonial practice has left a prebendal system in the ranks of the chiefs and their monarch. This

pattern is reminiscent of “indirect rule” policy in the colonial era, when the village chiefs – as the case of the Niger Delta indicates – were used to clobber any opposition.

Ojaide’s artistry is nuanced with the politics of revolutionising the society, where the elite see no need to redistribute the wealth arising from oil, which is the main livelihood of the oppressed masses in the Niger delta. This is apart from accruable revenue from fishing and farming. Nevertheless, the proceeds from fishing and farming have been depleted by the destruction of marine life through the activities of the oil companies and the federal government. Thus, according to Robert Young, “...poverty and starvation, then are not the mark of an absolute lack of resources, but arise from a failure to distribute them equitably...” (2003:135). In addition, as Ojaide identifies with “the wretched of the earth” in his art; he creates a vent out of the stifling political terrain that the repressive system creates and sustains. He carries his readers through different landscapes in the Niger delta and Nigeria in general, giving a cinematographic as well as naturalistic picture of this brand of politics.

Another political character in the novel, Omagbemi Mukoro, uses his student union activism to bring attention to the politics espoused in *The Activist*. He maintains that it is through gaining political power that change could come about in his community in order to make a case for redistributive economy: “Omagbemi saw politics as a means of using authority to change things positively, but getting to the position of power was a difficult path and he had to equip himself well to make it. To win an election, he had to use all resources at his disposal” (196). Even though Omagbemi Mukoro could use every means, which include strikes, riots, confrontation, and unionism among others to get at power and change, he sees dialogue garnished with intellectual activism as the most potent instrument of lasting change:

Omagbemi was young and had not experienced any democratic Government in the country and had no political models around to learn from. He was born under military rule, which had continued in one guise or another for more than three decades to

direct the affairs of the nation with guns and decrees. But he had prepared himself for politics by reading wide. He had read his history books and knew that Tafawa Balewa had a golden voice that cried for freedom. From his books too he knew Sir Ahmadu Bello as well as Zik of Africa and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, all astute politicians, who put their best for either their regions or the entire nation. He did some research to know about such political orators as Samuel Akintola, K.O. Mbadiwe, J.S. Tarka, and Aminu Kano that always held their listeners spellbound. (197-198)

Integrating intellectualism and education into the arsenal needed to effect change in the society is at the heart of Omagbemi's political engagement. This is an act of intellectual activism, as can be heard in his authorial voice. For him, "... the university must interact with its environment; it must be open to the people and ideas. He did not believe in the Ivory Tower principle that makes students and university teachers an exclusive segment of the society in which they operated. 'Tear down the fence', he appealed to the university administrators" (200).

As an aspect of the socialisation and "sensitization" process, the school system should be a medium through which the masses can be conscientised so as to effect change in the body politic. And this could only come about if the apparatuses of schooling are re-invented through intellectual activism. This will, in the final analysis, affect the shape of political activism. All Ojaide's major characters in the novel are essentially political characters. They include: the Activist, Pere, Chief Ishaka, Ebi and Omagbemi. They were all crafted to give credence to the artistic vision of the novelist, which culminates in populist governance. By doing this, the readers could gain palpable insights into how intellectualised politics/activism could radicalise people's thoughts and ideals and thereby affect societal development.

The precursor to this tradition in the novel is the Activist. His presence in the novel smacks of unusual intellectual leadership and politics:

Within the nine months of the academic session that marked
The Activist's first year of return, the campus atmosphere had

changed into a more radical one. Students that used to go and rob bus drivers on the highway were no longer doing so. The secret societies were still there, but instead of engaging in meaningless rituals in the grave hours of the night, they issue statements against the negative policies of the multinational oil companies and the military government... The vice-chancellor and other senior administrators got reports about the Activist and the radical students... This is not America, they said. He couldn't come to Nigeria and stir trouble in the university and when there was chaos runs back to his second home! (174)

For the Activist and his followers, there is no quitting; they stay true to their intellectual, political activism until changes emerge on the political horizon: the Activist becomes the governor of Niger Delta State, the marginalised became conscientised, the political structures are re-arranged and for the most part, the status quo is re-invented thanks to their leadership style. This is the brand of leadership Ojaide envisions in the Niger delta region of Nigeria and in the country in general: a leadership style that is populist-oriented and truly democratic.

The Activist is truly a political novel – it catalogues the fate and conditions of the Niger delta masses and Nigerians in general in contemporary African politics. In this regard, politics finds resonance in literature at those periods in which the living conditions of a people is pushed to the limit, when a class or group of people is subjugated and its way of life threatened and survival becomes the only meaningful value. *The Activist* was born in this tradition: to bring to the readers' attention the realities in modern Nigerian politics, and to find ways of negating these contradictions by engaging in intellectual politics/activism, which the Activist and his allies embody in the novel.

Literature and politics are hardly separable; political development determines the trajectory of literature in certain times, and literary creations have equally influenced political developments. Thus, political novels are like thermometers. They calibrate the temperature of a given era's political symptoms. Literary history is awash with evidence of this. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), is a dramatic meditation that

distils the effects of an autocratic society, with its sweeping repression on thought, moral inquiry and independent spirit. *All the King's Men* (1946) by Robert Penn Warren, is a fictionalised report on a major populist politician from the American South; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which is largely considered a sentimental account of the American experience of slavery, was instrumental in the Abolitionist Movement, and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), which mirrors the Nigerian coup d'état of 1966, was instrumental to the disquiet that visited him personally – the military personnel wanted his head because they thought he had foreknowledge of that putsch.

Social Responsibility, Media, Political Power and Intellectual Activism

Political power is attained through information dissemination and thought control. In this context, parallels exist between Reinhold Niebuhr's "necessary illusion" thesis and the "noble lies" theory of Leo Strauss, and between the "public relations" proposition of Edward Bernays and the "myth making" hypothesis of Niccolo Machiavelli. In all of these positions, which are used to distort facts, the ultimate aim is to ascertain how political power utilises propaganda and misinformation to misrepresent and distract from the real, factual issues of the day in order to maintain confusion and complicity. This approach thereby constitutes a roadblock to real democracy. In media practice, the concept of social responsibility informs us that the media should be responsible to the people in order to advance the cause of good governance. This technically means that the media should be a platform to advance the cause of humanity. It calls for socially relevant information to be disseminated and shared, thereby making available the stimulation of public dialogue on issues of concern to a democratic, populist society.

In a totalitarian society, it does not necessarily matter what the public think, since the government can achieve people's consent by using brute force. But when the government can't control the people by force, they have to control what they think as well; and the standard manner of achieving this is through propaganda. So, propaganda is to democratic culture what brute force or bludgeon is to totalitarian regime. Usually in

authoritarian states, the media is the channel through which the government controls people's opinion, thereby manufacturing consent. This is usually achieved via propaganda or stereotype. This is what Walter Lippmann calls the "picture in our heads" (1997:95). In a real democracy, when the media does this in faithfulness to social responsibility, it does not merely make a case for "journalistic activism in challenging and changing oppressive structures" (Shah 1996:145), rather it galvanizes "sensitization" and "conscientisation" amongst the public regarding the nature of such oppressive order as well as showing us how to change such inept landscapes. Every free society should ensure that the sovereignty of the people and the liberty of the press are correlative; they play complementary roles in the realisation and advancement of democratic culture. Sadly, not all democracies are truly representative of the people, nor are they uniformly participatory. This unwholesome situation parallels other, authoritarian governments.

In military regimes as well as democratic governments with weak, dogmatic democratic culture, democracy has been reduced to a mere doctrine of constants, wherein the masses are not truly represented. Such regimes balk at the ideals of participatory democracy, which foist on the media the triadic responsibility of being a civic forum for political dialogue that facilitates pluralistic views, a watchdog against the abuse of political power, and a mobilizing agent of the citizens. The media should be a catalyst for freedom. As Ogbondah observes, "a free press is an indispensable institution of a democratic society" (1997:291). A people whose social advancement is weakened by despotic government or through the activities of socially irresponsible media cannot make any meaningful progress. As a weak media becomes a platform for mere sedation rather than stimulation, a people's political freedoms are circumscribed, thus impinging on society's self-advancement and real democracy (Ngugi 1995:49). The foregoing is the backdrop of the Nigerian society reconstructed in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. Arguably, the amount of influence the media have on political events is determined by the relationship between them and the government or the political leadership at work in such society.

In Nigeria, the relationship between the media and the Nigerian government has never
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been cordial, to say the least. The proscription of media houses, incessant arrests of journalists, their incarceration and the brutality exercised by the powers that be against journalists and media practitioners are cases in point. In order to effect reasonable, progressive change in the body politic, the control of the media and the shaping of its contents are vital. This is basically what has informs the Activist's decision to set up a media house, so as to contribute to the efforts needed to change the inept order in the Niger delta. This attempt by the Activist amounts to intellectual activism – an act of ideological and political sensitization – the media help in shaping a people's opinion about the goings-on in their environment. It helps to obviate servitude of opinion, it contributes to a widening of a people's perspectives on politics and, above all, it deepens the intellectual alertness of the citizens, which ultimately impacts public opinion. For the Activist, this is a way of gaining political power and contributing to healthy governance, which is pro-people, fair, democratic and politically intellectual.

He had his eyes set on controlling a segment of the media to influence or affect public opinion. He had seen how the concerns of the Niger delta people had gone unreported. If he controlled a media house, that would not happen. The people needed allies in the media and he would provide one for them in whatever he chose to invest... Many people who nursed political ambition were already establishing television or radio stations in preparation for partisan politics. (267)

Socially responsible media goes beyond objective reporting to interpretive reporting; it foregrounds socially responsible activism, which is an upshot of political activism. Thus, social responsibility theory in media practice requires the explanation, interpretation and conscientisation of the populace regarding news reportage in their environment.

Socially responsible media is the idea behind the Activist's establishment of *The Patriot*, a newspaper whose motto is: "Justice and humanity for the people" (269). With *The Patriot*, the Activist distills the idea that if truth is reported without distortion, there should follow an advancement of human freedom on all fronts. This is essentially because development is a process of sensitization and conscientisation, whereby a people

takes stock of their situation and circumstances and as a group devises solutions (Bougault 1995:230). Thus, in order to have political development, the media have to be involved.

The media is a veritable instrument for the demystification of dogma, superstition and stereotype. Also, the media is a platform for the agitation of the citizen's rights and education; it is a medium for deflecting propaganda, half-truth and lies; and more than anything, it is an organ of political activism. This is the mindset that the Activist attains from his experience in the United States of America, where he had lived as an intellectual, whose power of imagination that nation has enlarged.

He had learnt from experience in the United States how the media manipulated public opinion to support a particular candidate they endorsed and he had anticipated the paper would play a crucial role in his political career. Fortunately, the paper was very popular in the State and was selling well outside too. With a good campaign organization, the Activist was sure to have a free medium to present his case to be governor of the Niger Delta State or one of the three senators representing the State at Abuja. (310)

In order to effect populist-oriented “changes to the State government” (318) and Abuja, the Activist maintains that the media should be a cardinal tool in achieving his political dream of seeing the Niger delta free from the miasma of post-colonialism and environmental neglect, to counter “the strong howling winds of the savannah” (312).

In this vein, the Activist sees a socially responsible media as the bastion of hope for the downtrodden of the Niger delta – the voice of Nigerians in their struggle for reasoned, political power. Also, for the Activist, who is a member of Board of Directors of *The Patriot* and, his cohorts like Ebi, the manager/publisher of the paper, and Omagbemi Mukoro, the paper's editor-in-chief, the decades of damage done to the Niger delta, which had been reported incorrectly and with sickening bias by the powers that be, including their paid partners – the journalists, has to be given fair and balanced reportage:

For the first time people of the Niger delta freely 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. The paper produced annals of local events, a book of the major experiences of the people. It detailed how the people fared in the previous year ... and became the unofficial ombudsman of government and corporate activities in the Niger Delta area. (269)

Conclusion

A riveting aspect of Ojaide's artistic craftsmanship is the peculiar manner in which he describes history as a crucible through which humanity relates to the cultural, political, social and economic state of society. This approach is evident in *The Activist*. For Ojaide, art entails the documentation of the diffused pains and clamour of the oppressed as well as a blueprint for negating the contradictions of society. His knack for producing socially relevant art that paints the plight of the downtrodden in a class oriented society, places Ojaide in stead with eminent social realist novelists on the African continent like Ousmane Sembene, Festus Iyayi, Isidore Okpewho, Wole Soyinka, Magfouz Naguib, Miriama Ba, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Alex La Guma, among others. In *The Activist*, Ojaide embarks on an aesthetic investigation of lived experience in the Niger delta region of Nigeria, an investigation that is aimed at negating the grisly cadences of postcolonial disillusionment.

This study has examined the repressive political power structure in the Niger delta and by extension, Nigeria, and how to resist this system through intellectual activism – a process that entails the incorporation of reasoned, ideological and the political education necessary to galvanise change in society. In doing this, the downtrodden could redeem their environment under threat by the political class. Here lies Ojaide's social vision in the novel: invoking social justice and contesting the tenets of repressive, exploitative order. This is achieved by intellectual politics devoid of the shenanigans of the political class. Though a refraction of realities in a given social matrix, poetry is in Tanure Ojaide's opinion is a veritable tool that can be used to illuminate a human path, and

engage with freedom in light of the traduced dignity of the human, and the battered environment.

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