The Battered Hearts that Throb in Agony: Environmental Pollution in Ojaide's *The Activist*

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Abstract The late twentieth century ignited a global revolutionary impulse in the interface between literature and environment. Environmentalist ideologies became more manifest in the articulation and criticism of literary texts. Nigerian literature experienced and has continued to experience different shades of representation of the environment of which Tanure Ojaide's narrative fiction is one of such representations. Although scholars have examined the representation of the environment in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006), they have often ignored the structural and persistent patterns of environmental pollution and how they relate to a class within an ethnic minority in the novel. This study examines the above relationship using environmental justice eco-critical approach, a strand of eco-criticism that establishes a connection between environmental issues and social justice, to disclose the social forces that are responsible for the heavy pollution in the work. These forces undergird the representations of and reflections on both the gaseous and the non-gaseous pollution/pollutants in the novel. It concludes that environmental privation is inextricably interwoven with social injustices, the biggest victims of which are the vulnerable and subservient class of a dispossessed minority ethnic group.

Key words ecocriticism; environmental literature; environmental humanities; Nigerian literature

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Introduction

This paper examines, within the context of environmental literary criticism, the representation of gaseous and non-gaseous pollution and how they relate to a specific class in a minority ethnic group in the novel under study. Nigeria's environmental literature has essentially focused on the representation of the Niger Delta[1] region of Nigeria. This is because the region has been enmeshed in "bioterrorism through the destruction of their aquatic and terrestrial reserves" (Onyema 236)[2] and also, monumental pollution and pollutants traceable to Nigeria's oil history. Aghoghovwia holds that, "in discussing the coastlines and littoral zones of Nigeria's Niger Delta, it is not possible to avoid reference to the 'Oil Encounter'" (176).[3] The discovery of crude oil in the region in the mid twentieth century brought about the presence of multinational oil companies that are involved in the different processes of exploration and processing of oil. The activities of these multinational oil companies have conversely altered the pristine state of the region as they are also a nightmare to the region and other adjoining parts within the Nigerian State. According to Edebor, "the oil producing areas of Niger Delta are the worst hit by gas flaring with untold impacts on agriculture, food security, public health, and fundamental human rights" (42).[4] The terrestrial and the aquatic resources of the region have been steadily debased and reduced to a site for different types of pollution and pollutants—ranging from the gaseous to the non-gaseous and from the biodegradable to the non-biodegradable. Writers and environmental rights

1 An oil producing coastal area in Nigeria which has been ravaged by the activities of multinational oil companies. The area is exposed to different kinds of pollution.

2 Chris Onyema and Chrstabel Onyema. "Tale of the Harmattan: Environmental Rights Discourse in Ojaide's Eco-poetry." *International Journal of Development and Management Review* (INJODEMAR) Vol.10, June 2015, 235– 250.

3 Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia. "Versifying the Environment and the 'Oil Encounter': Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs" Alter*nation Special Edition 6, 2013, 175–196.

4 Adedokun Solomon Edebor. "Rape of A Nation: An Eco-critical Reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water.*" *Journal of Arts and Humanities* Volume 06, Issue 09, 2017, 41-49.

campaigners have creatively reacted to the heavy pollution the region suffers, through the three major genres of literature.

Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* is a narrative representation of this battered region, a peep into the world of a people whose history has been inseparably and unfortunately intertwined with the history of pollution. Ojaide's foray into environmental literature is borne of the experience of the vicissitudes of a polluted environment of his people of the Niger Delta region. The social atmosphere of his oil-rich region continues to evoke neo-colonial tendencies and raise questions of conspiracies against a segment of the Nigerian State. This social condition may have spurred Ojaide into activism. His figure as a social crusader is aptly captured by Nwagbara who holds that "the hallmark of Ojaide's art is to use literature to engage the realities in his milieu. For him, literature is a reproduction of social experiences; it is a refraction of the totality of human experience" (18).[1] Ojaide's *The Activist*, like his poetry, such as *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986)*, Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998)*, The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), and so on - explores environmental pollution of the Niger Delta. Incidentally, Ojaide's passion as a social advocate intersperses elements of the fictional and the actual in this novel, as the plot, setting, characterization and so on draw heavily from the contemporary realities in Nigeria's Niger Delta region by making "reference to the historical and experiential" (Irele 11).[2] Lukacs' words: "it is very difficult for the writer really to free himself from the currents and fluctuations of his time and, within them, from those of his class" appropriately captures his endeavours (254).[3] He weaves a narration that evokes a scathing image of a people who are tortured to the margins of existence and "employs poetic metaphors to expose marginalization, neglect, exploitation, and the brutal reality of the region" (Okoro 26).[4] With commitment, his art is for social advocacy. He is in the league of African eco-conscious writers such as Isidore Okpewho, Niyi Osundare, Helon Habila, Kaine Agary, and so on, who espouse eco-consciousness and provoke diverse discourses on rethinking Africa's anthropocentric cultures.

The plot of the novel could be mistaken for actual events in view of its

1 Uzoechi Nwagbara "Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading ofOjaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs and Daydream of Ants and Other Poems." African Study Monographs*, 31(1), 2010, 17-30.

2 Abiola Irele. The *African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1981.) 11

3 Georg Lukacs. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962) 254.

4 Dike Okoro. "Situating Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan*: History, the Environment,Socio-economic and Political Concerns, and Orature" *Contemporary Literary Review,* Vol 5, No 2, 2018, 19-32.

historiographic underpinnings. Following this, most of the places mentioned in the novel like Itsekiri, Abuja, Ugheli, Urhobo, and others are real places. Some of the organizations mentioned like OPEC, CLO and others are actual organizations, and some of the circumstances reconstructed in the novel bear semblance with the realities in the actual Niger Delta. Nigeria, which is mentioned fairly often in the novel, portrays the historicity of *The Activist* as a piece of fiction based on actual events. This, perhaps, derives from the passion of the author to tell the story of suffering of his people which he could not achieve with his poetry. He offers an insight into the world of a people who are battered and who throb in the throes of environmental pollution. Ojaide takes on the apparel of a cultural historian and fuses it with his creative energy to respond to the troubling realities of oil pollution within the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta. In many respects, this echoes the position that "every writer is individually placed in society, responding to a general history from his own particular standpoint, making sense of it in his own concrete term" (Eagleton 8).[1]

Conceptual Framework/Literature

The two working concepts that chart the flow of this analysis are ecocriticism (in which environmental justice ecocriticism is a strand) and environmental pollution. In responding to what brought ecocriticism to existence as a methodology, Bellarsi avers that "historically, ecocriticism emerged in response to an environmental crisis and ecological spoliation" (74).[2] As a theory, it evolved in the last decade of the 20th Century and became popular with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. In her introduction to the text, Glotfelty defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii).[3] Ecocriticism is further conceptualized as an "omnibus term most commonly used to refer to environmentally oriented study of literature and (less commonly) other expressive media, including the critical premises informing such study" (Buell, Heise and Thornber 418).[4] The conceptualization of ecocriticism as an "omnibus term" draws from the multiplicity of strands within the ideological

1 Terry Eagleton. *Marxism and Literary Criticism.* (London: Methuen, 1976.) 8

2 See Franca Bellarsi. "The Challenges of Nature and Ecology." *Comparative American Studies an International Journal*, vol. 7, No.2, 2009, 71-84.

3 Cheryll Glotfelty. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology,* Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) xviii.

4 See Buell, Heise and Thornber. "Literature and Environment." *The Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 36. 2011, 417– 440.

frame of ecocriticism. Environmental justice ecocriticism is one of such strands, a combination of the principles of environmental justice and the propositions of ecocriticism.

Julia Sze observes that "environmental justice challenges the mainstream definition of environment and nature based on a wilderness/preservationist frame by foregrounding race and labor in its definition of what constitutes "nature"" (163).[1] T. Y. Reed draws from the principles of environmental justice and the ideals of ecocriticism and coined the concept of environmental justice ecocriticism in his essay, "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism". He states his motivation and holds that, "in coining this label, I hope to coalesce existing work and help foster new work that understands and elaborates the crucial connections between environmental concerns and social justice in the context of ecocriticism" (145).[2] Reed advances fundamental questions that touch on class and race through environmental justice ecocriticism. Among the questions are: "How can literature and criticism further efforts of the environmental justice movement to bring attention to ways in which environmental degradation and hazards unequally affect poor people and people of color? How has racism domestically and internationally enabled greater environmental irresponsibility? […]. How can issues like toxic waste, incinerators, lead poisoning, uranium mining and tailings, and other environmental health issues, be brought forth more fully in literature and criticism? [...]. How can ecocriticism encourage justice and sustainable development in the so-called Third World?" (149).[3]The foregoing questions raised by Reed are the cornerstones upon which the principles of environmental justice ecocriticism were founded. They will greatly influence the analyses of this work.

Environmental justice ecocriticism broadened its scope from its traditional application and an initial focus on the American minorities, to include global minorities; just in similar manner ecocriticism expanded its threshold from an initial focus on the Anglo-American writings to a more robust global perspective that saw the integration of the literatures of the former colonies of the imperial powers. In environmental justice ecocriticism, the ecocentric and the anthropocentric proclivities collapse into Paul Tylor's "biocentric" perspective which places

1 Julia Sze. "From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice." *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy*. Ed. Joni Adamson et al. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002) 163.

2 See T. Y Reed. "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism." *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy*. Eds. Joni Adamson et al (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002) 145.

3 T. Y. Reed's efforts to establish a framework for environmental justice ecocriticism.

importance on both humans and the non-humans on Earth (100).[1] It trumps the interconnection of the structures of environmental privation and social inequality. Thus, environmental justice ecocriticism is a site for an intersection between environmental problems and social problems.

Abosede grasps the concept of environmental pollution as applied in this study and holds that "pollution of the environment is one of the major effects of human technological advancement. It results when a change in the environment harmfully affects the quality of human life including effects on animals, microorganisms and plants" (14).[2] Deviating from Abosede's idea of environmental pollution as occasioned by progress, Isife affirms that this pollution "can be categorized into three groups" of "air or atmospheric pollution, aquatic or water pollution and land or surface area pollution" (29).[3] Within this study, atmospheric pollution is discussed as gaseous pollution while aquatic and surface pollution are discussed as non-gaseous pollution. Gaseous and non-gaseous pollution are used in this work as analytical tools. This draws from Ojaide's representation of the various forms of pollution in the novel under study.

The Struggle that Goes Unabated

Tanure Ojaide's Niger Delta region has witnessed tremendous struggles that are centred on both social and environmental justice. The late environmental rights activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, lived and died fighting the structures that fan the embers of social and environmental exploitations of the Niger Delta region. In writing on Ken Saro-Wiwa's struggles for social and environmental justice, Susan Comfort asserts that, "I explore his varied efforts to construct new narratives of social change that draw together environmental struggle with challenges to racial, ethnic, and class oppression" (230). She conceptualizes his varied struggles and sums them up as "cultural politics and social justice" (229).[4] Ken Saro-Wiwa's Ogoni ethnic minority suffers similar environmental pollution as Ojaide's Urhobo ethnic minority. Both Ogoni and Urhobo are among the ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta region of

1 See Paul W Taylor. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011) 100.

2 Ewetola E. Abosede. "Effect of Crude Oil Pollution on Some Soil Physical Properties." *IOSR Journal of Agriculture and Veterinary Science*. Volume 6, Issue 3, (Nov. - Dec. 2013), 14-17.

3 ChimaTheresa Isife. "Environmental Problems in Nigeria: A Review." *Sustainable Human Development Review*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1&2, 2012, 21–38.

4 Susan Comfort. "Struggle in Ogoniland: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Cultural Politics of Environmental Justice". *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy*. Eds. Joni Adamson et al (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002) 229.

Nigeria. It is under this backdrop that Ojaide's activism blossomed and manifested in his creative works, of which, *The Activist* is a component in his composite literary productions. Ojaruega sums up *The Activist* as eco-activism thus: "Ojaide's Activist refuses to be a passive observer of the environmental endangerment going on in his beloved region" (41).[1]

Umezinwa critiques *The Activist* through the perspective of female activism. She sees the narrative as an echo of women's collective activism and holds that "Tanure Ojaide was one of the African authors to put women in the forefront burner of the black agitation against exploitation, violation and other ills of colonialism" (2019).[2] Ojaide's narrative is an effusion of privation, debasement, resistance and so on; thematic underpinnings that pervade his writings. His idiosyncratic style ceaselessly echoes structured injustices of which, humans and the environment are victims. Writing on the image of the environment in Tanure Ojaide's *The Tales of the Harmattan,* Onwudinjo observes that "Ojaide uses the devastated condition of the Niger Delta to reveal the lost friendship between man and environment" (515).[3] The belligerent relationship between humans and the environment is also an echo of the belligerent relationship among humans, an aftermath of power play, leading Nwagbara to declare that "*The Activist* is a contemporary novel that deals with post-independence disillusionment about oil politics, ethnic marginalisation (sic) and environmental predation in Nigeria" (2008:225).[4] In all, they have omitted concentrating wholly on the social valence remotely prompting the environmental degradation in the work. This essay, through environmental justice ecocriticism, analyzes the representation of the gaseous and the non-gaseous pollution against the social forces that induce them in the first instance.

Gaseous Pollution as a Narrative Structure

Ojaide opens his narrative and graphically portrays issues that border on environmental health, a major concern of environmental justice ecocriticism, by

1 Enajite Ojaruega. "Eco-activism in Contemporary African Literature: Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist.*" *Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes.* Ed. Ogaga Okuyade (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2013) 41

2 Jennifer Umezinwa. "Gender Discourses and the Portraiture of Women Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist,*" 2019. DOI .10.13140/RG.2.2.22355.02089.

3 Kenechukwu Onwudinjo. "A Critical Perspective on the Image of the Environment in Tanure Ojaide's *The Tales of The Harmattan.*" *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2015, 505–518.

4 Uzoechi Nwagbara. "Political Power and Intellectual Activism in Tanure Ojaide's The Activist." *Nebula 5.4*, December 2008, 225–253.

addressing the question of how "issues like toxic waste," "lead poisoning," "and other environmental health issues" are upstaged in literature (Reed 149).[1] *The Activist* takes off on the preponderance of human pollution of the environment, where a careless interaction with the environment is captured by the narrator. He describes the movement of the Activist, the major character in the work, from the airport after his arrival from the US to his hotel room and what he witnesses as he moves along a Lagos street, "the motorcyclist meandered through the congested road as his engine rattled noisily and exhaled dark smoke and was soon out of sight" (10-11). The motorcyclist shows no interest about the state of the engine of his motorcycle which generates chemical compounds that pollute the environment. The dark smoke from the motorcycle's exhaust has the description of sulfur dioxide. This reveals that the state of the motorcycle's engine does not aid a complete burning of fuel. This episode at a Lagos street heralds greater pollution that is yet to come as the narrative gradually shifts to the Niger Delta, where baffling trends in human pollution of the environment are subsisting structures. The heavy pollution in the Niger-Delta is fallout of oil extraction as pollution is implicated in oil extraction and associated activities. This setting seems to highlight the much neglected minor but equally polluting activities in the Niger Delta ecology of environmental pollution. Call them a subdivision of the trending behemoth of pollution.

The above is supported by a major polluting episode. The village of Ekakpamre, a village in the Niger Delta, is completely burnt down as a result of oil blowout. The greatest pollutant the people of the Niger Delta suffer is oil. According to the narrator:

> An oil blowout exacerbated by a pipe leakage and fueled by gas flares, threw Ekakpamre and its people into an unprecedented state of anxiety […]. Bell Oil knew very well that there was a blowout but did not ask its fire –fighting team to put out the fire […]. The poisonous methane gas fumes engulfed plant, wildlife, and humans around for days […]. The residents found themselves helpless before this monstrous fire. They were all black from the sooth of smoke and ashes. There were many premature births because some pregnant women went into sudden labor. Babies coughed relentlessly. The old wheezed. Eyes itched and those already with poor eyesight had their problems worsened by the fire and smoke. No one was safe from the fuming blaze. (240-241)

1 What T. Y. Reed considers the major preoccupation of environmental justice ecocriticism.

The scenario described presents oil in a temperature at which the distinction between liquid and gas disappears. Oil, as it were, is a non-gaseous substance because it exists in liquid form. But in the above extract, it is subjected to a very high temperature as a result of burning. This burning results in the emission of gaseous substances. The oil blowout in Ekakpamre village that results in unimaginable fire outbreak, together with the reported gas flares release chemicals into the atmosphere. These chemicals may interact in dangerous ways to harm living things.

The effects of this gaseous pollution are very immediate as they are very traumatic and pathetic in the village. Imagine the list of negative things that happened because of the oil blowout and consequent burning. According to the narrator, "pregnant women went into sudden labor," "babies coughed relentlessly," "the old wheezed," "eyes itched," and "the poisonous methane gas fumes engulfed plants, wildlife, and humans." He further concluded that, "no one was safe from the fuming blaze." This portrays man's utter neglect, and negative interaction with the environment. A very disheartening point is that the company whose activities caused this catastrophe does not care about the situation. The Bell Oil is after oil exploration and profit maximization, which bequeaths them the power to act as they will. This acquired economic power is responsible for their disregard of their corporate social responsibilities which should have upped the welfare of the people through whose resources they are empowered. Unfortunately, the indigenes of the Niger Delta become systematically impoverished and relegated to a condition that weakens thoughts of resistance. The distribution of opportunities and privileges are skewed to favour relatively more powerful class and more populous ethnic nationalities within Nigeria's social strata. This draws from the power dynamics that concentrate power on the Federal Military Government and other quasi surrogates, like the Bell Oil. There is no devolution of power or balance of power which would have given the Niger Delta region a comparative advantage over other regions in issues of ownership rights and the corresponding benefits. These social injustices therein are reflective of power play.

The activities of Bell Oil that poison the atmosphere and endanger the lives of the people of the Niger Delta are portrayed as frequent occurrences**;** a trend that cuts across Niger Delta villages. Ojaide's evocation of this unjust and dangerous trend addresses Reed's concern of how literature and criticism can "bring attention to ways in which environmental degradation and hazards unequally affect poor people and people of color" (149). The oil blowout and fire incidents are not only noted in Ekakpamre village. According to the narrator:

> When there was the blowout at Roko village, the Activist saw a test case of Bell's callousness that opened an opportunity for attack. The pipes crossing the village burst and caught fire. The pipes had been shoddily laid to the oil installations a long time ago when oil was discovered in the area […]. The pipes were leaking from age because they were weather beaten. These pipes crossed playgrounds of children, crossed cassava farms of the women, and even went through many parts of the village. Residential homes stood on both sides of pipe lines […]. When there was this outburst of crude oil that easily caught fire; the village was burnt to the ground. (175-176)

The foregoing reveals a great deal of insensitivity and human-corporate wickedness as a giant oil prospecting company cages villages with oil pipes, even when the dangerous effects of oil blowout are public knowledge. The question is, would the Bell Oil have engaged in what Reed calls "environmental irresponsibility" (149), if the Niger Delta were to be their homeland? The answer is in the negative, as unfolding realities will confirm. The Bell Oil deliberately fails to provide fire-fighting equipment to such villages, should oil blowout occur. This is a dangerous capitalist model of one with power in a powerless, poverty-stricken minority setting. It sets itself up as a threat to the lives of the people by engaging in a deliberate degradation of their environment, an action that they will never deliberately undertake in the West.

The curve of human exposure to gaseous pollution continues to be on the rise and appears intractable, possibly, owing to the company's purposeful perpetuation of unjust actions against the people. The account of a deliberate use of tear gas on some women of the Niger Delta who are on a peaceful protest against the degradation of their environment is a site of the powerful using the instruments of power to subdue the weak. In an attempt to abort the nude protest organized by these women, Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR), the narrator reveals the uncanny forces the women had to contend with, in this case, an overwhelming gaseous pollution that sent the women into a soporific state:

> The world was denied the spectacle of a naked parade of old women before the oil terminal and the nearby flow station. Mask-wearing navy personnel with the assistance of retired marines kept by Bell Oil Company in their own coordinated plan overwhelmed the island with tear gas and a type of gas nobody knew its name but made people dizzy and mindless. Every exposed

person was daze and the women and pressmen became drowsy and sleepy. (251)

It is ironical that these women got an overdose of what they were out to stop. An exposure to tear gas inherently goes with some consequential effects that are often negative. The effects include burning sensation on the skin, irritation of the eyes, nose, difficulty in breathing, and other attendant effects that depend on the type of tear gas used and the quantity released into the atmosphere. It is obvious that a high concentration of tear gas that surpasses description is used on the Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR) and the pressmen. The narrator says it is "a type of gas nobody knew its name but made people dizzy and mindless", he further says "every exposed person was dazed and the women and pressmen became drowsy and sleepy". Although tear gas might be taken as a non-lethal weapon for crowd control but it can still be very dangerous.

Uwe Heinrich released a study commissioned by John C. Danforth, of the Office of Special Counsel, to investigate the use of tear gas by the FBI at the Branch Davidians' Mount Carmel compound. He concluded that the lethality of tear gas used would have been determined mainly by two factors: whether gas masks were used and whether the occupants were trapped in a room. He suggests that there is the possibility that a high exposure of tear gas can significantly contribute to or even cause lethal effects. He further says, "many reports have associated tear gas exposure with miscarriages. This is consistent with its reported clastogenic effect (abnormal chromosome change) on mammalian cells" (37).[1] If an exposure to tear gas is associated with these negative effects, it is obvious that the Women of the Delta Forum are not free from these effects, especially as some of them are still in their reproductive age, even the protest leader, Ebi, who has a nascent marriage to the Activist. These helpless women, Women of the Delta Forum had organized a peaceful protest against the devastation of their environment with all kinds of pollution, which by extension affect their health, only to face another deadly pollutant in gaseous form, tear gas. In this, they faced a hierarchy of social injustice. The first is enough for a responsible government to close the company's operations and further functioning. The second is enough for those peopling the management to be slammed with criminal charges that would see them being penalized and fortune of damages paid to serve as deterrent to future exploiters of the powerless.

The Battered Hearts on the Throes of Non-Gaseous Pollution

1 See Uwe Heinrich. *The Toxicity and Lethality of Tear Gas* (New York: Johnson & Hadel, 2001) 37.

The concept of non-gaseous pollution bears on the solid and liquid states of matter that pollute the environment of those whose livelihood, the substratum for power-balancing, depends on its wholeness. Thanks to the snag within this group, the acclaimed activist. When the Activist and his girlfriend, Ebi who is also a lecturer as the Activist at the Niger Delta University go on a picnic in the Great River, the narrator repots the fascinating discovery of Ebi, with regard to the level of pollution in the river she used to know very well in her childhood days:

> The magnitude of the desolation of the water shocked them. Where were the flying fish that used to shoot out of the water into the air and then somersault back into water? That spectacle was now confined to memory. The water was no longer the herb dark draught that she liked to dip her hands into and wash her face with. It was light green, greasy, and smelly. The large fish population had either been decimated by chemicals from oil industries or migrated downstream into the ocean. Where were the flocks of storks, kingfishers, and many exotic types of birds that filled the airspace as one approached the ocean? (90-91)

The degree of pollution in the Great River is similar to that of the Ugunu River. This is a case of the very useful becoming useless. The narrative gradually reveals the degree of pollution in the Niger Delta as it also reveals an amenable scoundrel, a pseudo messiah whose actions contribute to the devastation of the Niger Delta environment, who is also the protagonist and who bears the name, the Activist. In a sense, the oppressed and underpowered minority in need of liberation has within its ranks one who highlights the overbearing attitude of the unjust oil company.

"The magnitude of the desolation" of the Great River ought not to have shocked the Activist because he is also culpable in the desolation, irrespective of his grandstanding as a social and environmental activist. Consequently, one may be forced to ask: in what sense is he actually "the Activist"? An activist is "someone who works hard to achieve social or political change, especially as an active member of a political organization."[1] Is the Activist an active member of any political organization? Does he work hard to achieve political change? Does he work hard to achieve social change? Why his role in the Delta Cartel? These are some of the fundamental questions the very name the protagonist bears raises. A man who desires and works for social change should not have been involved, for

1 See "activist" in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (3rd Ed.) (Essex: Longman Group, 1995).

whatever reason, in a cartel that specializes in oil bunkering; illegal oil business. This is also the same man that laments about the devastation and degradation of his environment with all its pollution. The Activist is aware that bunkering involves blowing of oil pipes for the purpose of stealing oil. His role in the ignominious Delta Cartel is similar to the role of Bell Oil multinational in polluting the environment of the Niger Delta. The Activist is as depraved as the oil companies that deteriorate the Niger Delta as well as the Federal Military Government that has failed to protect the environment against mindless devastation and privation. Call it a triangular complicity. This is why the character of the Activist is a bunch of contradictions. There is no genuine activism in his character and personality. He exudes diverse images and changes with the changing times. His grandstanding and preposterous dispositions appear to be the height of Ojaide's craft in a narration that exposes the scoundrels, the charlatans and pseudo personalities who live in perpetual pretence in order to exploit more the battered communities of the Niger Delta. Perhaps, this is the reason why there is so much power on the side of the oil companies and powerlessness on the side of the people. Unjustness cannot but thrive here.

Textual evidences abound of the triangular complicity in repressing the dispossessed. The inhabitants of the Niger Delta are not equally exposed to pollution. This consolidates Merchant's position as observed by Bellarsi that "'hierarchical differences within human society affect the character of environmental problems' (Merchant, 2008: 27), as not all classes and ethnic groups are equal before environmental pollution" (76).[1] The social relations that expose the Niger Delta and its people to environmental hazards are encouraged by racist and class tendencies, with the support of the Government. Class stratification, domestic and international racial prejudice are enablers of larger "environmental irresponsibility" (Reed 149). The Government and its agents eternally sustain the interlocking paradigms that encourage the subjugation of the Niger Delta. For example, the foreign nationals live far away from the people, in an atmosphere that is much better than where the people live. They do not drink from the greenish ponds the people drink from nor suffer from oil licks and explosions the people suffer from. In describing the beautiful residential quarters of the Bell Oil Company and a river that runs behind the fence which serves as public water for the local villagers, the narrator states:

Several gardeners drove mowers and kept the entire place manicured and

1 See Franca Bellarsi. "The Challenges of Nature and Ecology" *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, vol. 7, No.2, 2009, 71-84.

> trimmed. Some other workers swept the roads and picked trash from the streets. Trash drums stood at different locations to ensure that the streets were maintained and kept clean. Bold signs admonished residents against littering and violators were threatened with heavy fines. This town was neither Warri nor Lagos, slum cities; rather it was Ugunu, a model European township in the heart of Africa…behind the tall concrete fence, local villagers still fetched water from the Ugunu River, brown from chemicals of oil exploration, for bathing and cooking needs. (276)

Class stratification and environmental racism can be teased out as well. The Bell Oil Company is a multinational company that bears no corporate social responsibilities in the Niger Delta. Their corporate social responsibility should have been, at least, to protect the environment that nourishes their business but such commitment is lacking. It seems difficult to believe that the Ugunu Quarters exist in an environment such as the Niger Delta; an environment mistreated and a people traumatized. Why is it out of the considerations of the company to extend some facilities at the Ugunu Quarters to the local villagers? And the narrator says that the villagers "still fetched water from the Ugunu River, brown from chemicals of oil exploration." It is sad that those who share in a common humanity could be meted with inhuman acts by their fellow humans. The Ugunu River has been polluted with chemicals as a result of oil exploration, and the perpetrators have refused to provide an alternative water supply for the local villagers. They are left to fetch from their polluted river, soaking themselves with chemicals and eating food cooked with chemicals. The aquatic life that sustains the people is destroyed, their water becomes unfit for human consumption and their existence is threatened. The narrator describes the living condition of the characters as hell-like. This is a contrast to other inland states, whose land does not produce the oil they benefit from. Those inland states enjoy good living conditions and also enjoy the oil wealth much more than the Niger Delta that produces it. This is because of power play that keeps and sustains their advantageous positions. The narrator acknowledges this:

> The Federal military Government operated a quota system that favored inland states that inflated their population by counting their cows, dogs, and goats as humans. That was what they believed a national census to be all about. Since they had population advantage, the people of those states enjoyed the oil prosperity at the expense of the hard-toiling farmers and fishermen and women whose land, waters and air were polluted by oil slicks, blowouts, and

> permanent flares that made hell a daily experience of the Niger Delta people. (48-49)

The characters in the Niger Delta should have had a comparative advantage over those in the inland states in terms of development but the reverse is the case.

The social and environmental injustices perpetrated in the Niger Delta stimulate criminality and produce individuals who are not only amenable but vulnerable to criminal tendencies. The environment has a great deal of influence on human development. Quality environment can translate to quality life and reduce negative tendencies. Some psychological and antisocial problems such as depression, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, rape, and so on, have a high concentration in poor living environment. All these ricocheted from the first layer of unjust behaviour, the first level of social injustice between the company and the people, before it recreated itself among the dispossessed. This might account for the unending restiveness in the Niger Delta. There are cases of rape, robbery, constant uprising, and cultism at the Niger Delta University. This might also account for the murder of Professor Tobore Ede by the students of the Niger Delta University. Professor Ede had gone to the University, according to the narrator, "with the task of pacifying the restless students" (117), over the oil blowout at Roko village. He was burnt alive because he was considered an ally of the Bell Oil multinational company, the very company that has questions to answer in the devastation of the environment of the Niger Delta. Onah traces the interlocking relationship between human beings and the environment and concludes that "the human being and the environment relate to each other dialectically. As we affect the environment, it in turn affects us" (37).[1] Such issues as the unimaginable pollution, the depletion of forests, the total disturbance of the ecosystem, the social paradigms that exclude the people from the benefits of their resources and breed poverty are actions that inherently go with unavoidable reactions. These negative actions and reactions reinforce the living condition in the Niger Delta.

The cases of rape in the novel reveal the double trauma the women face; a traceable indirect impact of the first-degree social unjustness set off by the oil company. First, the trauma occasioned by the activities of the oil companies which destroyed their environment, and secondly the antisocial activities of their fellow citizens whom the squalid environment has broken and battered. These social deviants turn their women to victims of robbery and rape. Environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources have a great deal of gender

1 Fab Onah. *Human Resource Management* (Nsukka: Fulladu, 2003) 37.

implications as a result of social norms that circumscribe gender roles. The women have had to face the trauma of searching for good water which has continued to elude them because the Ugunu River, the Great River and other sources of water are more of chemicals than water. The search for this essential and domestic item is to the detriment of other activities that relate to their development and empowerment. The narrator graphically captures the disturbing images of women in the Niger Delta:

> Photographs moved the Activist immensely. He had pasted to his bedroom wall photos of starving children and those of raped and battered women. He kept a file with newspaper cuttings of various forms of pollution. Clouds of smoke enveloping human beings in their homes; women fetching water from a greenish stream. (17)

There is neither development plan for the Niger Delta nor interest in raising the living standard of the people; "women fetching water from a greenish stream" reveals that there is no alternative source of water as it echoes Merchant's position, as noted by Bellarsi, that "society's neglect of the poor and ethnic minorities is usually made manifest in their predictable relegation to enclaves characterized by toxic or low-quality environments (Merchant, 2008: 28–30)" (76). The environment of the Niger Delta is a "low-quality" one, corrosive by any measurement, through dangerous chemicals or debilitating human actions. It is a disheartening narrative that has different colours of human injustice meted out to a people who are highly incapable of holding out against the powerful in a depressing scenario of power asymmetry– a story of battered hearts that throb in agony. The account of the narrator that hell is a daily experience of the Niger Delta people is a metaphor that conveys the image of an environment that has collapsed under the heavy burden of social injustice And Ojaide could not have made a better attempt at exposing this than he has in *The Activist*.

Conclusion

Ojaide artistically weaves in the novel a structural exploration of humans' relationship with the environment and also humans' relationship with fellow humans. *The Activist* is among the very few African novels that have fully explored the various kinds of pollution and pollutants that have been used to alter the environment and subdue a particular class in a definite geographical location. The text explores what Crosby refers to as *ecological imperialism*: "a

form of colonialism aimed at damaging as well as exploiting the environment and ecology of the colonized" (452).[1] Crosby's position is constantly echoed and reinforced by extrapolations from the text. The Bell multinational oil company displays crass colonial posture, through its actions and inactions in the Niger Delta. Ably encouraged by the complicity of the Federal Military Government, the company becomes the lever of power with which the underpowered, less protected and marginalized minority, the Niger Delta people, are ruthlessly crushed The accumulated power on the side of the company easily sets it aside as an unconscionable violator of human and environmental dignity in the course of which it perpetrates unjust actions. . The graphic of images of "dark smoke," "gas flare," "oil blowout," "tear gas," "acid rain," "carbon monoxide," "sulfur dioxide," "river, brown from chemicals," "greasy and smelly stream," and so on are not only pointers to the despoliation of the environment but also symbolic representations of the suffering of the characters in the Niger Delta, first, as black people in the hands of the company and secondly, as a minority group within the Nigerian State. It is very unlikely that any of the big tribal nations within the Nigerian setting would have suffered the unjust actions of both the government and the oil company as the Niger Delta people did if oil were mined in their territories. Rooted here is the success of *The Activist* as a representation of the woes of the weak and unprotected in the hands of the powerful and protected as they unpretentiously set off environmental devastation and social injustice.

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