

Oppressive Tendencies and their Manifestations on Nigerians in Tanure Ojaide's, *the Activist* and Helon Habila's, *Waiting for an Angel*

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Abstract

Nigerian writers have continued to address social, economic and political problems of Nigeria in the gamut of creative works produced in the country. Therefore, the current revolutionary pivot of the novel is an expression of writers' dissatisfaction and disaffection with the debilitating social, economic and political structures of the Nigerian nation, especially after independence from the colonial masters. So, with its focus on the oppressed in the Nigerian society, this paper aims at exploring the various facets of oppression as explored in the Nigerian novel. The novels under study, Tanure Ojaide's, 'The Activist' and Helon Habila's, 'Waiting for an Angel', are peopled with oppressed personas and groups in each setting. The discussion of the texts is anchored on sociological criticism. The paper concludes that the future of the Nigerian society is not totally bleak, but that hope reverberates within the individual and that those Nigerians who are truly after the betterment of Nigeria can still take back Nigeria from those who are currently perpetrating the stagnancy and destruction of Nigeria. The novelists studied in this paper, therefore, foreshadow the triumph of good over evil.

Keywords: Nigeria, Nigerians, Oppression, Sociological criticism.

Introduction

In the words of our late eminent African and Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (1). Without doubts, the above perfect observation by Achebe, arguably one of the world's most erudite and prolific literary scholars and social commentators, situates the canker worm that has consistently eaten deep into the Nigerian political, economic and social landscape since independence. Ours is a nation with a teeming and resourceful human population, and abundant natural, agricultural and mineral resources but yet, wallowing in misgovernance and mismanagement.

In fact, leadership, in all its ramifications, has actually been the bane of our collective existence such that today, Nigeria has become a reference point of oppression, exploitation, tyranny, impunity, poverty, bribery and corruption, electoral frauds, inequality, kidnapping, banditry, and so many other social, economic and political ills and vices. These are plaguing the citizenry, especially the poor masses and those who advocate a just and functional society. It is for this reason of correcting the ills and vices in the society, that literature looks into the problems inherent in a society. These ills and vices manifest in all aspects of the Nigerian life, ranging from the political, social, economic to the cultural, and which the prominent of them all, is the political

oppression and exploitation as recurrent themes in contemporary Nigerian novels. These, the novelists being studied, portray in their respective chosen novels.

Oppression and Environmental Degradation in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

Tanure Ojaide's novel, *The Activist*, is a contemporary political novel. The novel dwells on the post-independence disillusionment about oppression, ethnic marginalization, oil politics and intrigues, and environmental degradation in Nigeria. As Uzoechi Nwagbara states, the novel "...reconstructs the plight of the downtrodden and marginalized in the Niger-Delta, and Nigeria, by extension.... It refracts the destruction done to the Nigerian environment by the multinationals in partnership with the political class (225).

The novel portrays how Nigerians, having won independence, have come to realize that on many fronts, it is still only an illusion, because without real political power, they cannot significantly raise their economic, social and cultural levels or participate actively in public life. Without a doubt, Nigeria is a country of great economic potentials. It is unfortunate however, that even though it is richly endowed with oil, solid minerals and abundance of human, land and water resources, the country remains economically impoverished. In fact, the discovery of oil made Nigeria rich and extravagant, and somewhat idle as to forgo her primary industry of agriculture. Unfortunately, while the elite leaders bask in wealth, hunger and poverty become the lot of the unemployed and less privileged.

So, in *The Activist*, the storyline dwells on oppression through environmental degradation. The environment has been greatly abused as a result of oil exploration. The discovery of oil in the Niger-Delta region impoverishes their environs and deprives the citizens, their means of livelihood. The people have been variously exposed to untold oppression and hardship by successive military administrations. The unabating degradation of its natural environment and the fact that mostly non-indigenes take up the good jobs, angers the original Niger-Deltans. To this end, the novelist states: that. "the people of those states enjoyed the oil prosperity at the expense of the hard-toiling farmers and fishermen and women whose lands, waters and air were polluted by oil slicks, blowouts, and permanent flares that made hell a daily experience of the Niger-Delta" (58).

As the narrator states, the Niger-Delta environment is greatly impoverished due to oil exploration. The rate of food production has drastically reduced, marine life and farm crops are destroyed and fishing which is a major economic activity of the Niger-Deltans becomes a past event. Oil spillages on their farmlands make farming unproductive, and farmers receive no compensation for their losses. Unabating gas flares in the vicinity and the high pressure oil-pipelines have become threats to human life. Thus, the novelist states that "The air used to be cool because of constant rain and the luxuriant forest, but oil slicks, blowouts, and gas flares had destroyed that life. Even the rain that falls was soot-black that no more did anybody drink rainwater, which, of all waters, used to be described as God-given water" (82).

As a result of all the foregoing, the Activist, Pere and his area boys, and the student union of the university see it as an opportunity to demonstrate. When the oil company hears of the proposed protest through their agents, they decide to send Bell Oil's community development officer to pacify the student groups. Professor Tabore Ede comes to campus with the task of pacifying the restive students. As the narrator states, "He dressed flamboyantly in a flowing robe made of expensive brocade. That robe would cost more than one student's annual school fees; its embroidery alone would take care of a senior student's recommended books for the entire year" (193). Such is the display of affluence by a fellow Niger-Deltan, at the expense of the suffering

and humiliated people. The professor tries to bribe the students with drinks and false promises from the oil companies but he fails. His false accusations of the people make the students mete out jungle justice on him.

Politically, the novel examines the human condition in the face of oppression, tyranny and military dictatorship. The people are immensely oppressed and any effort they make to protect themselves, fails. Corruption is at the highest peak because most educated elites of the Niger-Delta, like the incinerated Professor Tabore Ede, receive huge sums of money from the oil companies to shut their ears from the cries of the helpless victims who suffer untold hardships from Bell Oil and O & G companies. Even the titled men of the region are not left out, except Chief Tobi Ishaka who strongly refuses to partake in sharing the bribe money given to them by the oil companies. Sadly, a few individuals now enjoy wealth at the expense of many who do not have the means of livelihood and shelter since the farms and the rivers have been destroyed. Though initially, the discovery of oil in their lands brought joy to the people, it later became a curse, a source of oppression, suffering, exploitation, deprivation and poverty. According to the narrator, "Ishaka had rejoiced when oil was first discovered in his farmland and family land. He expected a transformation of the rural place to a city. He had been to Lagos . . ." (176). Unfortunately, all these expectations are unrealized as the national profits from oil are used to develop other places.

The People's Revolutionary Struggle for Change

The clamour for change is the only permanent feature in life, especially for a good life for the majority. However, no matter the hue of politics or political power in Nigeria, it has spawned virtually the same crushing effects: oppression, political instability, socio-economic misery, environmental devastation, ecological dissonance and ethnic crises. The social contradictions in Nigeria are more pronounced in the Niger-Delta, the oil producing areas, where the nation's wealth situates. The oppressive system in this region usually provokes incessant conflicts and political violence. As the narrator rightly states, ". . . one cannot be with the exploiter and the exploited at the same time. The slave owner and the slave cannot be on the same side. The colonizer and the colonized cannot be on the same side. One must be on the side of humanity. It is cowardly not to choose to take sides" (189).

So, through the collective consciousness of three enigmatic characters: the Activist, a cosmopolitan and radical scholar; Ebi, a staunch environmentalist/womanist; and Pere, a dogged agent of change and representative of the downtrodden in the Niger-Delta society, Ojaide takes the reader into a masterfully woven web of local and universal eco-politics. This novel fits a befitting tribute to the late novelist, social critic and environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa. As a stock character, his characterization in the novel evokes wholesome change in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, and the entire country in general. To accomplish his mission therefore, the Activist typifies a middle-aged man whose life includes a mission to change the livelihood of his impoverished Niger-Delta, win the hand of his heartthrob and eventual wife, Ebi, and honour his service to humanity. Ojaide's protagonist is a man determined to protest and fight the corruption in the corridors of power and the exploitative practices of multinational oil companies in the Niger-Delta.

Ojaide's novel is full of memorable characters tied to the same destiny of survival and protest. Some of the protesting characters, though poverty-stricken, risk their lives by engaging in the oil bunkering business dominated by corrupt army generals and the powerful elite. In fact, *The Activist* is Ojaide's tribute to the unemployed and less privileged citizens in the struggle to gain their share of the multi-billion-dollar oil business in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. He acknowledges their plight, tells the story from their perspective, and gives them a voice.

Ojaide brings to his readers, characters whose morals sum up the predicaments of people in an oppressed society. This novel, unlike any other work of creative imagination written about the oil saga in modern Nigeria, also exposes the factors responsible for the creation of the "area boys", a group of Niger-Delta youths and adults, armed and constantly waging battles with government forces as they fight for their rights to gain economic empowerment and equal share of the profits of oil exploration in their homeland. Using the plight of the leader of the "area boys" as an example, Ojaide explores the mindset of those rebelling youngsters to show how social and economic forces dictate the morals of an oppressed community thus: "Pere saw petroleum as his own property forcibly taken away from him. He was going to set up a business to reclaim his birthright. Call it illegal business, smuggling, stealing, or bunkering, he did not care what dirty names you called it. . . ." (137).

The power and importance of women as political and social forces in their local communities is another pivotal matter the novelist brings to bear in this novel. He introduces readers to the planned nude protest by the elderly women of the Niger-Delta as a result of negligence shown by the federal government and multinational oil exploiters. As the narrator states, the women gather to help find solutions to the prevailing problems in their environment since the efforts of the men in the past had not yielded much positive results. As Mrs. Taylor says, "Let the oil bosses and the military chiefs not continue to take women for granted! They would be surprised at the power that women could wield when driven to the wall" (244). At the end, we see the effectiveness and potency of this type of protest. Thus, one week after the nude protest, the Niger-Delta based head of Bell Oil Company, Mr. Van Hoort dies, and few days later, the military head of state also dies. The nude protest, according to the narrator, ". . . was in keeping with traditional practice of cursing the oppressor " (265).

It is worthy to note that Ojaide's protagonist, the Activist, portrays passion and love for his country and state. This is why he refuses to accept defeat and is undaunted amidst obstacles and ridicules by his people and colleagues because of his refusal to return to the States. At the end, the Activist realizes his dream of liberating his people from the clutches of oppression and exploitation as he becomes the first democratically elected governor of the Niger-Delta State, and he brought a lot of major positive changes to the state government and the welfare of his people. In a nutshell therefore, *The Activist* can be summarized as a well-told tale of failure of political leadership in present-day Nigeria, where oil politics has held the masses down for a long time.

Oppression and the Fight Against Tyranny in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* is an interesting satirical work of literature. With clarity, Habila without mincing words, exposes horrifying depictions of everyday violence, oppression, victimization, and exploitation under military regimes in Nigeria. The novel serves as a kind of reminder to Nigerians, of our past mistakes, the consequences, and how to avoid such in the future. *Waiting for an Angel* is a novel which explores the oppression, misery, humiliation, sorrow and victimization people experience under a dictatorial government in Nigeria. It is a literary account of historical oppressions that Nigerians experienced during the government of the late General Sani Abacha. It is a novel that has seven sections but the stories are closely connected. It captures the reign of terror in the country then, as espoused in the experiences of the various characters, from Lomba to James.

Lomba, the major character in the novel, is a journalist and frustrated novelist who, in the opening chapter, is a starving political prisoner in a Lagos jail. He has been detained for two years without trial. As the novel opens, Lomba has gone beyond anger, which he describes as "the baffled

prisoner's attempt to re-crystallize his slowly dissolving self... and enter a 'state of tranquil acceptance' of his fate" (9-10). However, a brief ray of hope flickers when the jailer finds the poems and journal entries he has written and hidden, and persuades him to write some love poems on his behalf, for the better educated woman he is courting.

The novel then flashes back to the years before Lomba's arrest and as various episodes unfold, the novelist shows us the effects of this dictatorial government on the ordinary people who populate the country. Though life is difficult and opportunities almost non-existent, the young people still have hopes and dreams. When Lomba and a friend have their fortunes told by a poet, one of the young men asks to know the day of his death, which he hopes will be "spectacular and momentous..." (36); a day he is eventually assured he will know when the time comes.

Moving forward, and with no chance of getting his own novel published, Lomba takes a job, writing for *The Dial*, for which he occasionally reports on political demonstrations, one of which was the demonstration in which people who live in Morgan Street (Poverty Street) peacefully protested the neglect of their neighborhood, viz "We are dying from lack of hope" (132), as his friend, Joshua, says at the demonstration. Unfortunately, the unarmed protesters are suddenly attacked by fifty-armed riot policemen; cans of teargas are exploded, protesters are severely beaten and running women and children are killed by speeding cars on the adjacent highway.

As hinted earlier, *Waiting for an Angel* has seven inter-connected episodes, each named after the narrator or major character or incident in the novel, and these, give the novel a chain of unified actions which encapsulate not just the feeling of a specific character or protagonist, but the feeling of a greater number of the people in the society from which a general statement could be made on the level of oppression, tyranny, hardship, exploitation, and brutality witnessed during the military era in Nigerian politics. Thus, *Waiting for an Angel*, tells the story of Lomba, a young brilliant journalist. The novel begins with Lomba in prison revealed by his diary of poems and letters meant to be sent to nobody. Then the story in a manner of progressive, or rather retrogressive pattern, flows backwards in the time of the telling to encapsulate the tales of Lomba in his days as a university student, how he meets and falls in love with Alice who is later forced by circumstances, to marry a general.

Also, through Mela, a fifteen-year-old boy, we learn more about the residents of Poverty Street, Lagos. The street is initially named Morgan Street but the inhabitants, having wallowed in much poverty, decide to rename it "Poverty Street". They have a leader, Joshua, who is in love with his former pupil-turned-prostitute, Hagar. He is the one who leads the people on a peaceful demonstration, which Lomba is meant to cover. The soldiers mistake their peaceful demonstration for violence and non-conformity and unleash terror. Joshua escapes half-dead while Lomba is picked up and thrown into the prison where we first meet him, when the novel starts. He is confined to the prison without trial just like all the other political detainees. His only obvious offence is that he is a journalist who writes only the truth.

Habila captures the energy, sensitivity, despair, and stubborn hope of a new generation with a combination of gritty realism and poetic beauty. In *Waiting for an Angel*, the situations of oppression, terror, anguish, victimization and molestation meted out to citizens of Nigeria during the military era in politics are exposed. In the novel, Habila particularly concerns himself with General Abacha's years of untold hardship, killing, violence, brutality and imprisonment that send the country many years back in development and infrastructure; years of blood, tears, denial of rights and when many pay with their lives.

The novelist also delves into the psychological disposition of many individuals to expose the traumatic effects of the military era on them. For example, Bola expresses the helplessness of the students in the Union's resolution thus:

Can't you see what is happening? The military have turned the country into one huge barracks, into a prison. Every street out there is crawling with them; the people lock their doors, scared to come out. They play with us, as if we are puppets. Yesterday, they changed the transition date again. IBB is deceiving us, he has no intention of leaving. It is our duty to push him out. We have decided to boycott lectures from tomorrow, all Federal Universities... (41)

The students think they are dealing with people with conscience. Unfortunately, when they protest, what do they get in return? Some students are killed and many are wounded. The soldiers exploit the opportunity to rape the girls and loot the properties of the students who run for the safety of their lives, and the school closed down till further notice by the military government. At last, General Abacha dies and that is how the "Angel" of liberty comes to the rescue of many citizens under the bondage of military dictatorship.

As Claude Ake states of the military in Nigeria, The ascendancy of the military is one of the great tragedies of Africa, for the military is nothing other than a highly specialized apparatus of violence whose salience begins when sociability has become impossible and when civilized values no longer apply, when we must take to the battlefields. That is why military rule is inherently and inevitably de-civilizing. (7)

In the politics of Nigeria, nothing that would be said of Abacha and other military regimes will even be an overstatement. Military regime is a nightmare that people pray never to experience again. Habila has demonstrated this with his creative ingenuity as a very creative artist. He also demonstrates how a novelist becomes a social crusader to suggest that which ought to be taken away from the society and that which has to be cultivated for peace and harmony to reign forever. In fact, Habila preaches change, and a total eradication of military men in the politics of the nation, if Nigeria will someday boast of unprecedented achievements as the giant of Africa that she prides herself to be.

Conclusion

According to Frank Donner, "the oppressed is one on whom authority or power is exercised in a burdensome, cruel or unjust manner" (4). In this wise, the individual is humiliated or tortured physically, emotionally, politically, economically and even socially as he finds himself in a helpless situation. Thus, the oppressed here, is in a feeling of being heavily burdened, beset by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety and uncertainties. From the foregoing postulation, it is most clear that the characters and storylines in the two novels explored in this paper, aptly reflect oppression in its facets enumerated above. Nigerian writers are aware that their leaders have made caricature of the Nigerian independence. They are there to see that things change for the better but the opposite is the case. This has prompted some Nigerian writers to write against the political, economic and social ills and oppression in their different societies. These writers include Ojaide and Habila, whose works have been to a reasonable extent, studied herein.

The Activist evokes political activism or participation needed in order to transform Nigeria. It reconstructs the plight of the oppressed, downtrodden and marginalized in the Niger-Delta, and Nigeria by extension. Perhaps this assertion is empowered by Jude Agho when he states that "The Activist mirrors the politics of oil, social deprivation, economic bankruptcy and the rotten political structure of the Nigerian state. Using the Niger-Delta as a springboard, Ojaide reifies the corrupt practices of the Federal Government and its multinational cohorts" (133). Agho goes further to note that "This work, in a number of levels, also catalogues the homology between the rulers and

the ruled; the superstructure and the base, and the flirtations between the Federal Government and the multinational companies" (133).

On *Waiting for an Angel*, Cornel Ujowundu states that "while an afterword explains the history of Nigeria's brutal juntas, it is Habila's fictionalization that reveals the true casualties of oppression better than any news account or history" (15). One of the concerns of liberation struggles is to free the people from oppression, exploitation, corruption, and dehumanization amongst others and this can be achieved through radical activism and struggle as seen in this novel where even students rise in defence of their country and show their discontentment over the dictatorial military regime.

In conclusion, the novels, Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, explore the injustices meted out to the people of Nigeria, hence the fight for equality, justice and fair play. The protagonists in the two novels are rightly advocating the equality and fair distribution of scarce resources, as well as respect for the human personality against some of the political and social ills in their different societies.

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