

Media and Nigerian Society in Nigerian Postcolonial Literature:

A study of Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

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Abstract

The arguments border on importance and availability of connections between and the Nigerian society and journalism. In Nigeria literature and journalism tell about oppressions humans' faces, especially in postcolonial African society where both are instruments of resistance against oppression. This paper combines the concepts and ideas of Nigerian press and its connection with the Nigerian society. Through the novel *The Activist* by Ojaide this paper will locate the place of journalists in Nigeria.

Key words: Media, Oppression, Journalist

Before the arrival of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the ecosystem was pure and natural. The Niger Delta people lived quietly, savoring the green environment characterized by clean water for farming/domestic use, fishing and fertile land for agriculture, wide forest for hunting animals and games among others. The discovery of oil in the region was supposed to bring wealth, job opportunities, infrastructural development, social amenities etc to the people of the region. But the man's greed and quest for materialism has disturbed the order of nature.

The region is plagued by immeasurable shortage, pollution, destruction of farming and aquatic life, which has further impoverished the people. Many Nigerian people have lost their sources of living. This has led to rise in unlawful activities like oil pipe vandalization, kidnapping, militancy, prostitution, armed robbery among others. While the federal government and multi-national oil companies wax stronger and richer, the region is becoming a phantom of its former self. Ojaide's *The Activist* portrays the clear vision of oil terrorism in Nigeria.

Oil violence continued to affect the region is well portrayed in the novel. In Ekakpamre, the entire village was also destroyed. The noxious gas destroyed wildlife and humans. The police/soldier drafted there again failed in their duties as they busied themselves looting homes of already traumatized sufferers. The people's efforts to drench the fire failed, "they were black from the sooth of smoke and ashes. There were many premature births because some pregnant women went into sudden labour. Babies coughed relentlessly. The old wheezed. Eyes itched and those already with poor eyesight had their problems worsened by the fire and smoke" (207).

The novel situates itself within the socio-economic political discourse of injustice and trauma witnessed by the people of the region. The title of the novel foregrounds the author's ideological stance concerning the difficulty of his people. Ojaide has written several collections of poetry which include *Labyrinths of the Delta*, *Delta Blues and Home songs* and *The Eagle's Vision*. Ojaide's novel includes *Stars of the Long Night* which celebrates the Niger Delta of yore, of great men/women as well as their rich cultural heritage. *The Activist* takes a swipe into the socio-political and economic activities in the rich oil region which celebrates youthful academia and freedom fighters who combine courage and intellect to advance the reason of popular resistance against exploitation by the federal government and its foreign collaborators.

In *The Activist*, Ojaide probes into gender and health concerns which have continued to destroy communities in the Niger Delta. The police, army and naval marines unleash terror on the people instead of protecting them. Terrorism is a global issue that has continued to plague most countries today. The novel shows a gross violation of human rights in the country. In addition, the Niger Delta people faced bio-terrorism inform of blowouts e.g in Roko village, which was caused by old leaking pipes which "crossed playground of children, crossed cassava farms of women and even went through many parts of the village. Residential homes stood on

both sides of pipelines” (*The Activist*, 154). This again is a clear example of insecurity of life and property which the people are subjected to. The oil companies bribe local chiefs and send the Community Development Officer, Professor Kokoba to reassure them of their safety. This is betrayal. This incident led to fire outbreak and destruction of the entire village. Ojaide records the deception, callousness and insensitivity of oil companies in the region

In Nigeria against the evils the Nigerian media contribute to the welfare of the society. In Nigeria throughout history it is clear that the Nigerian government has never stood for the people and Nigeria’s press always stand for the people. It is an obvious fact that the Nigerian media houses are facing a lot of pressures in the discharge of their duties from political leaders and other private interests. These constraints limit their abilities in the development of the society; however, they must not allow these challenges to get into the way of their job. Though the media are privately or publicly owned, the reason for their existence is not to serve as a propagandist machinery of their owners. Media houses sociologically and philosophically exist to serve as the custodian of the rights of the masses and they are supposed to champion the cause of the masses, from the remotest portion of the society to the highest level. They are the pillar of the realm and they must stand up to the tasks when the situation demands.

For the mass media to live up to the expectations of the masses, their rights must be guaranteed by the state. However the mass media are restricted from having access to information that has the tendency to develop the society. The military decrees from past military eras still witch-hunt the mass media practitioners in the discharge of their duties. The press in Nigeria is always being checkmated by various previous decrees of the past military administrations in the country. Olukotun, for example, contends that:

. . . all the anti-media decrees promulgated by Generals Babangida and Abacha are still on the statute books as at November 2001 inspite of several promises to expunge them, although they are not being enforced. These include offensive publication (proscription) Decree No.35 of 1993; State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree No.2 of 1984 under which journalists can be detained and held incommunicado for security reasons; The treason and other offences (Special Military Tribunal) Decree No.1 of 1996; as well as The Constitution (suspension and modification) Decree No. 107 of 1993 which annuls a citizen’s

right to public apology or compensation, if he was unjustly or unlawfully detained. (100)

Late General Sani Abacha exemplified the might of the government over the right of the press when he mandated one of the most established newspapers, *The Guardian* to nationalise its news contents in 1996. The refusal of the latter to comply, earned it the wrath of the ‘power that be’ – a manifestation that was made bear in a state-organised arson against the publishing house and an attempted murder of the publisher of the newspaper, Chief Felix Ibru. The press has equally been treated in disdainful manners even since the advent of the democratic rule in 1999.

The Nigerian press has various problems to cope with, apart from the draconian laws and limitations set by the government to control the media by past regimes. The oppression and repression militate against every existing and potential interest in promoting development news. The financial and social problems are also issues they contend with.

The reason for the oppression on the media by the various governments in Nigeria (particularly the past military governments) is because development journalism was originally conceptualised to serve as an ally of the government. Therefore, any medium that goes contrary to the dictate of the government of the day is either frustrated or forced into extinction.

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.

In a real democracy, the media are faithful to social responsibility. 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.

Through their works, the eminent writers Ojaide and Habila have proven that one can create awareness through media and bring a positive change in a society against any prevailing problems. The writers have established the fact through their works. The lead character in Ojaide's *The Activist* is a journalist. Ojaide generates great awareness in the society. The writer also pinpoint the fact that how important it is to be aware about the good and evil happenings in the society. Ojaide and Habila project the power of print media like newspaper, and magazine in their works.

Ojaide's novel *The Activist* promotes the significance of creating awareness in a society and how important it is to be aware of the social happenings in a society. Being sentient of any social evils in the society is very much needed for the people. People need to be aware of thing going on around them. Again, through media people can be sensitized. The common people have immense belief in the role of media in any society. Pere, who is one of the important characters in the novel, projects the view.

Pere told his fellow area boys, "If they were really interested in the restoration of the environment and securing control of their resources, these academics and students would make noise, write in the newspapers, and appear on radio and television expressing their views" (*The Activist* 194). This proves that common people are being aware of the importance of media and they trust that the press creates awareness in the society and it also brings constructive changes in the society.

The Activist in the novel *The Activist*, to impact the State government he keeps up media as a key instrument. The Activist also notices that the social media is the iron grip of the anticipation for the Niger delta subjugation – the influence of Nigerians in their combat. 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 rational alertness of the citizens, which ultimately impacts public opinion. Socially liable media goes beyond objective reporting to

interpretive reporting; it foregrounds socially responsible activism, which is an upshot of political activism.

Committed media is the idea behind the Activist's establishment of *The Patriot*, a newspaper whose motto is, "Justice and humanity for the people" (*The Activist* 269). With *The Patriot*, the Activist distils the idea that if truth is reported without deformation, there should follow an advancement of human freedom on all fronts. Thus, in order to have development in a society, the media have to be involved. If there is struggle, the people have to be aware of the societal evils and create awareness about the ill happening in the society and act smartly according to the thing around, then there will a big change in the society is the highlight of the study.

Works Cited

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