

**ECOLITERATURE AND LEADERSHIP DISCOURSE IN  
NIGERIA: A STUDY OF TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE  
ACTIVIST* AND HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER***

**Abigail Onowosemenmen Oaikhena**

Department of English Language and Literature  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka  
Email: abaigailabby1@gmail.com

**Dr. Mbanefo S. Ogene**

Department of English Language and Literature  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

**Abstract**

In Nigeria the effects of the destruction of the natural environment, resulting from the destructive extraction of resources have been seriously felt. This reality has been worsened by the *compradoria* stance of the national leadership class. The poor leadership of the country has influenced every strata of the society, particularly literary creativity. Adopting this *reflectionist* paradigm, this study examines the role of (mis)leadership in Nigeria, which has culminated in the seemingly intractable Niger Delta question in the creative works of select Nigerian authors. The paper argues that the leadership failures of the Nigerian state has not only been given attention, especially with regards to the Niger Delta question by eco-literary writers but also, have proffered some (neglected) suggestions on how these challenges could be resolved. This study examines the literary texts of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* as exemplars of eco-literary creativities that speak to our understanding of both the Niger Delta discourse as well as the leadership lacuna which

often, at the behest of multinational oil corporations work against the collective aspiration of the people. These writers, in their texts, uncover the socioeconomic relations, leadership failure and degraded environment/ecology that endangered the lives of the people in Niger Delta refereed through (global) capitalism.

**Keywords:** Militancy, Leadership, Environment, Capitalism and Neglect

## INTRODUCTION

The interplay of literature and the environment became a new area of interest and an intellectual linking bridge that centers principally on the relationship between literature and the environment. It addresses and foregrounds ecocritical issues as they unfold from the general abuse of the natural environment captured by literary writers who are mindful of and passionate about a hazard-free ecosystem. The symbiotic relationship that exists between literature and the environment has long been established and well articulated even before the formal inauguration of a critical approach to study the environmental side of literature-ecocriticism.

Jelica Tomic establishes the interconnectedness of literature and the environment, in her statement that ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary study of literature and environment. She asserts that,

The word ecocriticism is a semineologism. Eco is short of ecology, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. By analogy, ecocriticism

is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. These are obviously interdisciplinary studies, unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. That unusual (interdisciplinary) combination of the physical and the spiritual can be seen in some of the terms used in ecology and ecocriticism, which both have the same aim: to contribute to the preservation and survival of man (43).

Eco Literature explores the plunder of the natural environment; this manifests in various ways through the interaction of man with the environment. From Rachel Carlson's *Silent Spring* to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and from Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* to *The End of Nature* by Bill McKibben, the debate has been on the consequences of the interface between nature and people's activities on the planet. Nature in this respect is a victim of the human cultural agent. The cultural agent referred to here is global capitalism. The shift from the preservation of nature to capitalism in the wake of frontier global capitalism is fundamentally ensconced in the different modes of humanity's relation to the earth.

In Africa, the effects of the savage rape of the environment have been seriously felt resulting from the destructive extraction of resources. Nigerian writers particularly have used literature to interrogate the goings-on in the Nigerian environment that poses a threat to the environment, nature and society at large. An essential facet of this interrogation is eco-literary writings. Tanure Ojaide notes that what informed eco-writings in Nigeria

is what he describes as “senseless destruction of our original neighbours, the trees and animals” (*Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*. 16). Also Niyi Osundare’s crying revelation in the preface to *The Eye of the Earth* strengthens his desire for biotic wholesomeness as well as socio-economic wellbeing of the masses. According to him,

Waters are dying, forests are falling. A desert epidemic stalks a world where the rich and ruthless squander earth’s wealth on the invention of increasingly accomplished weapons of death, while millions of people perish daily from avoidable hunger. ( xvi)

However, these Nigerian environmental writers who include Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare and Kaine Agary among others have articulated a way of re-imagining the (Nigerian) environment that melds socio-economic existence with environmentalism. According to Emmanuel Nwagbara, “they have called for a prioritisation of green discourse for better leadership and socio-economic relations, as well as environmental sustainability” (qtd in *African Study Monographs*, 17). In order to give face to the invisible but palpable presence of capitalism on the Nigerian environment, these writers have turned to eco-literary writing. They have declared themselves chroniclers of the changing environmental times, an artistic engagement to save the environment from the shackles of global capitalism. Ernst Fisher highlights the malignant nature of capitalism, thus;

Capitalism turned everything into a commodity. With a hitherto unimaginable increase in production and productivity, extending the new

order dynamically to all parts of the globe and all areas of human existence, capitalism dissolved the old world into a cloud of whirling molecules, destroyed all direct relationships between producer and consumer and flung all products onto an anonymous market to be bought or sold. (50)

The reality of this practice finds resonance in an ever more globalised state of oppression and dominance which is characterised by the movement of resources from the periphery to the centre, as well as the destruction of the natural world of the periphery nations. Victor Ojarokotu asserts that,

This is the case in Nigeria, particularly the Niger Delta, where the multinationals in cahoots with the political class have wreaked havoc on the ecology, biodiversity, hydrocarbons, marine life and environment of the people all in the name of international business, oil exploration and global capitalism. (99)

The effect of global capitalism which is seen as oil politics, perpetuated by the multinational corporations in partnership with corrupt leadership system in Nigeria have greatly affected the people and the society negatively as they are constantly faced with poverty and hunger.

However, this study is predicated on a binary concept: Marxism and ecocriticism. They both work hand in hand in the study of Eco Literature in Nigeria. In separating them one may run the risk of 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 concerned writers. This concept is the

ideological and socio-economic education or engagement needed to sensitize as well as galvanise the masses and readers about the nature and the effect of capitalism and bad leadership in their environment. Ann Dobie asserts that:

The good Marxist critic is careful to avoid the kind of approach that concerns itself with form and craft at the expense of examining social realities. Instead, the Marxist critic will search out the depiction of inequities in social classes, an imbalance of goods and power among people, or manipulation of the worker by the bourgeoisie and will then point out the injustice of that society (93).

The thrust of Marxism in Eco Literature is to challenge the continuing imperialist modes of socio-economic and environmental dominance disguised in the name of development. In other words, the theory sets out to dispute as well as reject the do-gooder mentality of the West by discrediting the kind of development brought up in the name of modernization. As argued by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, ecocriticism sets out to debunk the western ideologies of development and redirect the focus of development away from the self-serving interest of the West. They claim that,

One of the central tasks of ecocriticism as an emergent field has been to contest – also to provide viable alternatives to – western ideologies of development. These contestations have mostly been in alignment with radical Third-World critiques that tend to see

development as little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the West (27)

Development, in this regard, can be viewed as a destructive weapon used by the elitist First World countries to continue to re-establish and expand the rift between them and the Third World countries (especially Africa), so that the former can continue to maintain its political power and economic hegemony over the latter. In this connection, Oswaldo De Rivero believes that “development in western ideology is a means of relegating the Third-World countries to the perpetual state of social, political and economic standstill under the guise of assisted modernization” (*The Myth of Development*, 110). Huggan and Tiffin, state that sustainable development is practically designed by the West as a regulating mechanism used to determine people’s everyday lives. They further assert that “The term ‘environment’ itself implies the marketability of nature providing an implicit rationalization for the control and management of natural resources by the global urban-industrial system and its primary political ally, the nation-state” (32)

From this, it is obvious that Marxism and ecocriticism have joined forces to collectively challenge human inequalities and environmental abuses. By the common grounds that Marxism and ecocriticism share in terms of advocacy for social-equality and environmental justice (however, undoubtedly polemical to a certain extent), most literary works that form the body of the Niger Delta literature have profoundly re-established and reinforced the ‘mutuality’ between Marxism and ecocriticism. By this, one would say, Marxist ecocriticism has become more

sophisticated in terms of drawing attention to the socio-political usefulness of literary texts without losing its aesthetic values.

Addressing the Niger Delta problem as a case of exploitation disguised in the name of development by leaders, some works testify to it as a colonial genesis that eventually graduates into continuing human inequality and environmental abuses. Of course, one has to admit that development as harmful as it is in itself, is not what Marxist ecocriticism is contending with, but the contention over the blatant social and environmental abuses perpetrated in its name. And this same development is a camouflage under which the Europe hides to sustain its political power and economic hegemony over the developing countries.

In practical terms, what Europe claims to sustain, is not development at all but market domination. After all, gaining economic power is synonymous with gaining absolute political power.

In the same vein, as already argued in this study, the first world countries which the oil companies stand for can divert the attention of the developing countries from making judicious use of the wealth that lies within their environment by controlling the leaders. These two bodies then work together for their own selfish aims at the detriment of the poor masses. This inhuman attitude of these two allies is what most writers of Niger Delta Literature in connection with Marxism stand against.

### **Leadership Negligence in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*.**

This novel was evidently written in the aftermath of the November 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa (the Ogoniland activist) by the Nigerian dictator, Sani Abacha, its implicit political accusations implicate not only the obvious targets



(international oil companies' neo-colonial predation; Nigerian leaders and businessmen who allow this by accepting the spoils of bribery; the lawless gun-toting warlords and their henchmen on all sides, whether army or police, or the militants with whom they play their nasty, bloody war games in the waters and on the islands of the Niger Delta), but also the local and international media who provide the stages on which the antagonists strut and rant.

The novel tells the story of a daring adventure of two journalists, Zaq and Rufus, commissioned by Mr. James Floode to go in search of his wife, Mrs. Isabel Floode was kidnapped by a group of Niger Delta militants on Irikefe Island. In the course of the journey, the journalists become crestfallen to experience, first-hand, the depth of environmental degradation and its lingering effects on the people. They see “the polluted waters, the forsaken villages, the gas flares, the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads capped and left jutting out of the oil-scorched earth, and the ever-present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree...”(*Oil on Water*, 182).

Though the experiences described tend to be bleak, with the atmosphere that is evoked of a predominantly brooding, menacing, frightening kind, Rufus's mostly matter-of-fact recording of his impressions and memories does at times allow a poetic lyricism. An alleviating tenderness to creep into his voice – like the occasional shafts of sunlight piercing the swirling mists over the Delta waters or the patches of clear water in between the murky, ill-smelling channels or shores full of oil-covered garbage or rotting creatures and remnants. Here is one example of the Niger Delta river scape and its shores as recounted by Rufus:

The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. In the village centre we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent under the wet, mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well's blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. At the other end of the village a little river trickled towards the big river where we had left our boat. The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands. (9)

The neglect of the region by the government has led to environmental degradation, pollution, loss of traditional occupations, rise in social vices like gun-running, kidnapping, militancy, oil theft as well as health hazards, to mention a few.

*Oil on Water* explores the issue of poverty, lack of social amenities as well as insensitivity of the Federal government and multinationals in the Niger Delta region these are the major causes of youth restiveness in Nigeria. Militancy is indeed not new in the region. It started in Isaac Boro, who out of "fear that the Ijaw would not have a fair deal in the military dispensation

declared the Niger Delta republic in 1966” (Darah, 10). The militant in the region are seen as defenders of the system. The youth have turned militants because they want to draw attention to their bastardised environment. This militancy can be likened to guerilla fighters. In *Oil on Water*, the narrator, Rufus, recalls a certain island they encountered with some reporters from Lagos as they search for the militant group that abducts Isabel Floode to interview them and also to confirm if she is still alive

In *Oil on Water*, a lot of concerned members of the communities have at one time or the other called the attention of their leaders (the government) and the oil companies to the deteriorating situation in the region, but nothing reasonable has been done. Instead, they feign deaf and dumb to the people’s excruciating experience and their continuous ululations. The extent of the injustice and insensitivity is incredible and alarming. One wonders if the leaders were hired from other countries, say, Sudan or Iraq, because they do not feel the pains of the people. They treat them as refugees or illegal immigrants. They trade their land for oil, degrade their environment and displace the people, cutting them off from their natural home and only means of sustenance. Yet there are no human feelings, no compassion whatsoever to lessen their burdens, allay their fears and douse their tensions. Their situation just keeps on degenerating.

### **Leadership and Revolutionary Discourse in Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*.**

Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist* is seen by many scholars as a work in which the author did not employ his radical voice against oppression. Although the text could not be discussed from the angle of ecocriticism but in it Ojaide reveals the goal of Marxism. Revolutionary aesthetics which serves as a corrective measures against bad leadership in the novel, is seen from the fall of the

bourgeoisie and rise of the proletariats which Marx considered as the perfect state of a nation's economic system, writers, especially the African writers, have written on the ills and vices in their different distinctive societies as a result of oppression and at the same time provide some steps needed for possible solutions.

Ojaide explores the economic and socio-political problems caused by oil in the Niger Delta in his novel, *The Activist*. Some of these problems are exploitation and the hijacking of people's natural resources to the detriment of the original owners, the cause of militancy and prostitution. The exploiters' actions generate a lot of protests both nationally and internationally as portrayed by Ojaide. The main character in the novel, the Activist "had flown to Europe several times on chartered flights to carry placards against Bell Oil International and Group of Seven over debt relief for third world countries. He saw World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as exploiters of developing countries." (*The Activist*, 16)

All Ojaide's major characters in the novel are essentially revolutionary characters. They include: the Activist, Pere, Chief Ishaka, Ebi and Omagbemi. They are all crafted to give credence to Ojaide's artistic vision, which culminates in populist governance. By doing this, the readers could gain palpable insights into how intellectualised activism could radicalise people's thoughts and ideals and thereby affect societal development.

In the novel, *The Activist*, Ojaide clearly depicts the goal of every Marxist struggle which is victory of the proletariats over the bourgeoisie in order to have a balanced economic system in the society. Through this he shows that the substructure can help

in overthrowing the base. A situation whereby with the aid of literature, the economic power of production will be in the hands of the lower class.

### **Conclusion**

From the analysis of the novels selected for this study, it is discovered that the socio-economic marginalization and environmental damage have a multiplier effect on the environment and the society: displacement, moral bankruptcy, violence, killing and kidnapping, proliferation of deadly weapons, debauchery and overall disruption of the social and ecological system. Therefore, a mutual relationship and benefit exist between Marxist discourse and environmental discourse and this helps to depict the role of our leaders in Nigeria with regards to literatures about the Niger Delta.. These writers have written accomplished novels that transcend their authorial thematic preoccupation and literary values, speaking to all mankind with such great practical belief and universal coverage that they are capable of making an irrepressible impact on society regardless of time and place. Indeed, they perfectly justify the assertion that an author is a product of experience and reality and literature can also change the system of things in a society for the better.

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