

# Binary, Bipartite Motifs and Counter-Hegemonic Strategies in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

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## Abstract

Language use is central to Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, negotiating a better living environment for the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Most literary essays on this text, however, overlook Ojaide's deployment of language to achieve his subversive vision. The text has been interpreted as environmentalism colored by an ideology or artistic documentation of the despoiled ecosystem, its effects on humans, the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta, and the consequential eco-activism. Another read of the text, however, reveals a binary relationship of dominance and subversion in which language is significant to both sides of the intercourse. The existence of dominance and resistance, therefore, necessitates the analysis of the text drawing from the Subaltern theory, an aspect of the Postcolonial theory to which dominance and resistance are central. This essay examines the deployment of language as a hegemonic and subversive tool in the oil politics in the Niger Delta. The binary relationship is couched in bi-partite motifs captured in epithets and contrasting images. In the binary, the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta yoked with the Nigerian military government, are juxtaposed with the people and the Niger Delta as oppressors and the oppressed. Through bipartite motifs that abound in the text, Ojaide concretizes the duality in the Nigerian society vis-a-vis the oil politics in the Niger Delta. In the duality, language is reinvented and mobilized significantly by both sides as a tool for demonizing and excluding each other to enable the subjugation or subversion of the other.

## Keywords

Binary, Bi-partite, Exploiters, Niger Delta, Multinational Oil Companies

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Much of the literary scholarship on the environmental issues on the Niger Delta expectedly focuses on the twining issues of environmental despoliation and petrodollar politics. A cursory read of Tanure Ojaide's eponymous novel, *The Activist*, readily yields the above-mentioned Siamese issues. The rhetorical implication of the language use, which is central to the environmental discourse and its twig, is, however, often overlooked as epitomized by Uzoechi Nwagbara (2008) and Enajite Ojaruega (2013) essays which respectively examine Ojaide's text as environmentalism colored by an ideology; and artistic documentation of the despoiled ecosystem; its effects on humans as well as the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta; and the consequential eco-activism.

A second read of the narrative, however, unfurls a hegemonic relationship with dominance and resistance as its corollary. In the domination and opposition, language use is greatly significant. The multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta and the people of the host communities are configured respectively in the narrative as domineering power and resisting subordinate. The existence of dominance and resistance, therefore, necessitates the analysis of the text with the subaltern theory, an aspect of the Postcolonial theory to which the cultural dominance of the West and America over and the resistance of erstwhile colonized are central. The theory has its origin traced to the scholars of the colonized world, the most eloquent of whom are Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. The scholars in this area of interest essentially examine the effects of the contact on colonized peripheries. These effects of the contact also include displacement, race, identity, gender, and recently globalization. *Subalternity*, an aspect of the Postcolonial theory, is made most eloquent by Spivak, who in her popular essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" examines the fate of the marginalized Other within the colonized subject.

In the hegemonic relation between the multinational oil companies and the host communities of the Niger Delta, language use is redolent of Foucault interpretation of discourse – that it means much more than general speaking, that it helps speakers and hearers to comprehend "themselves, their relation with others and know their place in the world." (Ashcroft et al. 70) Consequently, essential in our analysis of Ojaide's

environment-conscious text is the deployment of language to subvert a hegemonic binary, particularly, the selection of linguistic items that are bipartite motifs that abound in the text. The bipartite motifs, which are juxtapositional, are contrasting words, places, and people, deliberately selected by the author to underscore the duality of the oppressor(s) and the oppressed in the Niger Delta region.

While environmentalism is loudly thematized in Ojaide's *The Activist*, the environmental activism in the text is executed to a large extent on the basis of the existence of a hegemonic relationship couched in layers – between the Nigerian nation and Western powers (represented by multinational oil companies); inter-ethnic relations – majority and minority; class – upper and lower; and gender dichotomy – male and female. Fettered to these, there is also the construction of a binary of the past and the present. Through these binaries, the Nigerian nation, particularly the Niger Delta, is configured as a site for contestations between the oppressor(s) and the oppressed. The contests in the text all spin on the claim of ownership of the crude oil in the area, with both feuding parties struggling to exclude each other.

In the contest, language is essentially employed by the contestants as a weapon for two major purposes of exerting subjugation, and subversion or resistance to perceived oppression. This peculiar utilization of language reveals it as a potent political weapon. This interpretation is in tandem with the words of Francine Wattman Frank: "Language combines the functions of the mirror, a tool, and a weapon[...]language can be (used) by groups that enjoy the privilege of power[...] to legitimize their own value system by labelling others 'deviant' (108)". Frank's view dovetails into poststructuralist thinking that associates power with discourse (Selden et al. 178). Ngugi wa Thiongo' seems to be re-echoing this power/ discourse interaction when he examines language and power and colonialism. He contends "language is the most important vehicle through which power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. Bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (9).

In Ojaide's text, the oppressors, which are the multinational oil companies and the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, are depicted as the postcolonial Self that employs language to enable the unfettered appropriation of the riches of the oil in the Niger Delta. The use of language by the postcolonial Self to assert dominance is in tandem with Dale Spenders' re-echoing of feminist's allegation against patriarchy, that patriarchy uses language to prop male dominance over the female gender (qtd. in Selden et al. 121). This thinking has birthed the subversive altering of lexical entries in the dictionary by some feminist advocates. Similarly, in the Ojaide's text, the perceived marginalized Other, the people of the Niger Delta, mobilize language to demonize their perceived oppressor(s) and validate their subversive expropriation of oil in their region. In the text are the two contrasting words – "appropriation" or "expropriation" – which are redefined by each conflicting side to stigmatize the other and assert its ownership over the oil resources in the region.

Consequently, language functions as a major instrument through which the hierarchy in the Nigerian state is explored in the novel. Bill Ashcroft et al. seem to validate

Ojaide when they aver that language is a major medium through which hierarchical structures were constructed by imperial oppression (7). In the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, Ashcroft et al. (169) reveal that hierarchical structures were created by the colonizers essentially to establish distinctions in their intercourse with the colonized Others. This dovetails into Joy Alemazung's depiction of the relationship between the colonial masters and their African colonies as one between a stronger and exploitative partner and a weak, exploited partner whose resources were needed "to strengthen and enrich economies of western nations." (63)

Ojaide's in *The Activist* captures a binary hierarchy that catalyzes a conflict illustrated in the use of language that is indicative of dominance and subversion. In the text, through language, which comes through contrasting motifs, he configures the post-colonial Nigerian society as polarised between a postcolonial superior Self and an inferior Other – a relic of the colonial past. The Nigerian Military Government and the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region are captured as the superior Self, while the people of the region are the inferior Other. The text captures the postcolonial dual relation – a vestige of colonial Nigeria – as layers of hegemony with its attendant resistance by the marginalized Other.

### **The Hegemonic Relation between the Nigerian nation and the multinational Oil Companies**

The influence of the West continues in the lives of Africa in multiple ways, particularly in their cultural and economic authority over Africa. Leela Gandhi's opinion cements this position when she argues that colonialism does not terminate with the "colonial occupation" (27). No wonder that Edward Said sees colonialism as a "fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results" (qtd. in Gandhi 17). Some of the "unfair results" that manifest in the sustained control of the West on the economic sphere, instantiated in Africa, are explored in Ojaide's text through pictures of layers of binary relationships. The first layer of hegemonic relationship in the text is delineated the multinational oil companies, O&G Company and Bell Oil Companies operating in the Niger Delta, which are allegorically configured as the oppressors and the Nigerian nation, the Niger Delta people and environment are the victims of exploitation. Tsaaio's interpretation of postcolonial Nigeria corroborates Ojaide's perception of the country as exploitative when the latter contends that: Nigeria's real operative mechanism is unitary. In this lopsided, unjust, and oppressive arrangement, the true tenets of federalism have been negated and compromised by an overarching federal government at the center. The centralized government owns and controls all resources from the regions, aggregates them into a whole, and routinely retails them to the same region that has produced the resources in the first place (177-178).

Ojaide portrayal of the multinational oil companies as exploiters is traceable to his understanding of their foreign ownership – imperialism, a continuation of colonialism – and their activities that are deleterious to the people of the Niger Delta and their environment. In the text, the multinational oil companies "were all owned by white

people” (*Activist* 67). O&G is owned by America, Britain and Holland own Bell Oil Company. Bell is an allegorical representation of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), a major multinational oil company operating in the Niger Delta. In the reasoning of the Area boys (representatives of the militia groups in the Niger Delta in the text), these companies are partners in progress as “America” who “owned O&G Company[...] worked for hand in hand with Britain, Holland and Bell Oil Company.”(*Activist* 67) Ojaide’s interpretation here is reminiscent of Ngugi’s in *The Devil on the Cross* where he argues that the multinational corporations and their African directors in independent Kenya are neo-colonialists or compradors.

Similarly, in the activities of the multinational oil companies in Nigeria, the host country then under military leadership, is configured in *The Activist* as a comprador, a mere tool in the hands of the West as the latter easily deploys its security apparatus to protect the interest of its “masters” – the oil companies. The portrayal of Nigeria’s military leadership as an oppressive tool in the hands of the multinational oil companies against the people of the Niger Delta smacks of a nation polarised against itself – the Nigerian nation is presented as contending against the Niger Delta region.

The subservient role of the Nigerian military leadership as captured in the text also unveils a hegemonic structure of three components – the multinational oil companies at the top of the hegemony, followed by the Nigerian state that is depicted as an Other as well as a post-colonial Self. At the bottom are the people of the Niger Delta with their natural environment functioning as a marginal Other in postcolonial Nigeria. By this depiction, Ojaide presents the people of the Niger Delta region as victims of double oppression – from the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state.

The oil companies are consequently presented in the text as a symbol of the continuation of the colonization of the Nigeria nation, and by extension, the Niger Delta as Ojaide asserts in the text, “Colonization was the first stage, but the oil exploration would be the crowning glory of the modern swashbuckler[...]multinational corporation known as the major employers and manipulators of local national governments” (*Activist* 47). His perception here can be interpreted to be imperialism and this is consistent with Ania Loomba’s definition of imperialism she refers to it as “the conquest and control of other people’s land and good” (2). The conquered land is controlled through some nationals of the vanquished land and in the case of Nigeria, it is controlled through the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta with Nigerian leadership as the imperialists’ goad.

This portrayal reveals the existence of an alliance between the Nigerian leadership and multinationals, as depicted in the text. This, therefore, dichotomizes the postcolonial Nigerian nation – Nigerian nation and the Niger Delta, catalyzing the emergence of post-colonial Self or Centre and a marginal Other or subaltern. This emergent binary provokes distrust and consequently a contest of dominance and resistance between Self and Other. The cause of the feud is the riches of oil in the region over which either side in the duel claims exclusive possession and language becomes a major weapon deployed by either party in this strife to exert sole ownership, dominance, or subversion. The dual use of

language is consistent with poststructuralists association of discourse with power that has been earlier mentioned in this essay. Each side of the contestation employs its epithets that abound the text to demonize the other and legitimize its expropriation or appropriation of the oil from the region. To the people of the oil communities, the oil companies are vandals, extortionists, and ingrates. The oil companies on their part see the people of the region as Oliver Twist, ever unsatisfied with the supposed largess from them. In the novel, the words of Professor Tobere Ede, a Niger Delta indigene, who is working for the Bell Oil Company as a community liaison officer, unfurl the use of words by the postcolonial Self (the multinational oil companies) for the subjugation and devaluation of the postcolonial Other (the people of their host communities). He demonizes the people of the oil company's host communality thus:

They set their village on fire because they wanted to extort money from Bell Oil Company. People have become lazy and want an easy way to make money. None of those villagers has a farm as they used to; none of them carries on fishing in waters proverbially rich with all kinds of fresh and salt water fish. The villagers only sit at home drinking illicit gin and playing both draft (sic) and eko game [...] The mere fact of oil pipelines passing through the village has made them feel entitled to earn huge sums of money without work. That was why they did it. They are arsonists.” (Activist 178)

The statement above is made by the professor in the defense of Bell Oil Company that the people of Niger Delta have been accused of being derelict over a crude oil-induced conflagration that razed the Roko community in the Niger Delta with all their farmland. Negative epithets such as “lazy and want an easy way to make money”, “only sit at home drinking illicit gin and playing draft (sic)” and “arsonists” (178) as employed by the professor, are no doubt delimiting, a strategy akin to feminists accusation of patriarchy's use of language essentially to devalue the female gender. The use of words as demonstrated by the professor is also redolent of Foucault's argument that what the truth depends on who dominates the discourse (qtd. in Selden et al. 121).

Ojaide captures the words of Professor Ede as the basis for his advocacy for the resistance by the marginal Other. Dominance and resistance, which are indicative of a binary, are juxtaposed in the text as a deliberate bipartite stratagem of the writer. Besides the words of the professor, there are yet other conflicting words deployed in the text by the writer to underscore the binary of dominance and resistance, and they are examined in turn in the rest of the essay.

### **“Outsiders”/ “insiders” Motifs as Indices of a hegemonic Binary**

The binary intercourse of the oppressors and the exploited seems to instigate a feeling of alienation on the part of the people of Niger Delta from the Nigerian nation. Ojaide explores this alienation through the mobilization of contrasting epithets –

“outsiders”/“insiders”. These words are used by the people of the Niger Delta in the text to configure a dichotomized intercourse in the Nigerian state in which they are “Insiders” and people of the rest of the country and the multinational oil companies operators are the “outsiders”: This is succinctly captured in the words of the narrator thus, “It was true that apart from the white outsiders, there were also Nigerian outsiders or inlanders (sic) and they were from the majority groups” (*Activist* 163).

In Vincent Egbuson’s *Love My Planet*, a novel on the environmental politics in the Niger Delta, the same “outsiders” epithet is employed to exclude foreign nationals and Nigerians of the major ethnic nationalities from the people of the Niger Delta labeled, Daglobe delta in the novel. The basis of delineation is the varying standards of living by the two. In Egbuson’s text, in contrast to the low standard of living of the people of Daglobe delta, the Nigerians employees, with other foreign employees of the multinational oil companies live a life of affluence in their exclusive habitation within the deltaic swamp:

Oil city, the city of light, where there was electricity 24/7, sprang up from where wet land was cleared and sand filled – Oil city tickled the young women of Ogazza also with its paradoxical (sic) grid of paved ways, mini football pitch, concrete court for lawn tennis, many comfortable portakabins, one shiny prefabricated bungalow, a swimming pool and a borehole that supplied running water. The bulk of its residents are Filipinos, Britons and Chinese. There were a handful of Nigerians and Venezuelans and Daglobans, no one from Ogazza, no one from Daglobe delta. (160)

By the two oppositional words, as used in Ojaide’s text, the people of Niger Delta assert their ownership over the oil wealth domiciled in their region, while excluding others. These contrasting words, which are motifs in the text, serve as a means by which the writer advocates resistance by the people of the Niger Delta against a hegemonic relationship in which they feel short-changed. This is underscored in the recurrence of the words “outsiders” and “insiders” in the following pages of the text 125; 137; 138; 140; 141; 142; 163; 222; 252; 267. These several repetitions of the oppositional words in the text loudly configure the Niger Delta as a site of contestation over the ownership of the riches of the region.

These recurring motifs not only capture an antithetical relationship of “owners” and “thieves”; they also function as a means of demonization of the perceived opponent(s). The people of the Niger Delta are presented as the owners, the “insiders” whom “outsiders” are robbing. Epithets such as “robbers”; “rob”; “robbed”; “stole” and “stolen” consequently are mobilized by the people of the Niger Delta alongside the “outsider”/“insider” motifs to demonize perceived strangers to the Niger Delta. The words suggest that the people of the region do not seem to see themselves as being a part of the larger Nigerian polity. Consequently, they see the natural oil resources from their part of the country as not as common wealth, but exclusively theirs. It is such general understanding

that, in the novel, Ojaide expresses through the Area boys' decision to pick up arms against the government or get involved in bunkering of oil so as

[...]to reclaim what had been robbed from them but also holding firmly to what was theirs that others were attempting to snatch away[...] They treated those who agreed with their robbers the same way they treated the robbers themselves. They saw no contradiction in robbing those who had robbed them (*The Activist* 46).

It is within the prism of such thinking that on his part also that Pere, a major character in the narrative, "...would rob the robbers to get back his property." (*The Activist* 137) As he reasons, "Bell Oil Company or any of the other oil companies did not have more right to the oil than him. The Federal Military Government too in Lagos or Abuja did not have more right to the oil than him." (*The Activist* 138) Pere's resolution to get into illegal bunkering is hinged on the recurring binary of "outsiders" and "insiders." He validates this when he explains that the reason for his involvement in bunkering is because of information he has that "outsiders" such as "many top military officers were involved in bunkering. He has been told, "The head of the military junta was himself a bunkering chieftain." (*The Activist* 136) He resolves, therefore, "[...]petroleum is his 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." (*The Activist* 137)

Pere's statement above also exposes the counter labels such as "illegal business," "smuggling", "stealing", or "bunkering," (*The Activist* 137) mobilized by the Nigerian military government and the multinational oil companies to demonize the people of the Niger Delta who engage in oil bunkering. To Pere, the aforementioned linguistics items, that he refers to as dirty epithets employed by the military government against his people, are stratagems to stigmatize, dominate and exclude the people of the Niger Delta from appropriating the oil, while they (the military rulers) expropriate/appropriate it unfettered. Pere's understanding of the use of language is consistent with van Dijk's contention that a dominant group legitimizes its position discursively and communicatively and it is able to wield control over the dominated through its control over the means of production or wealth (5). Pere's perception of the language used by the military rulers suggests that the Postcolonial Self employs language for its hegemonic gains.

Pere's counter decision above also unfolds another purpose for the deployment of the bipartite labels "outsiders" and the "insiders" by the people of the Niger Delta. In the discourse of the oppressed, the words function as a stratagem for legitimizing their resistance against the Nigerian state. The perceived legality of their subversion is eloquent in the subsequent statement of Pere, which, no doubt, is an authorial voice: "As one has to fight fire with fire, so should the illegality of the outsiders be resisted with whatever means by the insiders" (*The Activist* 138). By the use of words by the conflicting sides, words have lost their lexical meaning for new ones as the positive or negative denotation of such



words as “legal” or “illegal” is determined by the side that deploys it. In similar vein, word like “bunkering” with negative meaning could be reconfigured to mean the opposite depending on the user. It is within such reasoning that, on his part, the Activist, the hero of the text, “saw bunkering as a weapon against the two principal outsiders that were robbing and destroying the people of the Niger Delta.” (*The Activist* 140) He validates the illegal act, arguing “hurting the destroyers of the natural environment was a good thing to do.” (*The Activist* 141) Eton Simon and Gloria Worugji (190) seem to align themselves with the likes of Pere whom the duo valorize, designating them freedom fighters in the bracket of Mau Mau freedom fighters depicted in Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*. Essentially, Ojaide has reinterpreted the import of these words in the text to achieve his subversive intent.

### **Parallel Images and Motifs as Subversive Strategies**

Ojaide advances his subversive intent in the text by also creating pictures of the opposing standard of living of the perceived oppressor (multinational oil companies) and the oppressed (a host community). The conflicting pictures that are juxtapositional are catalytic of resistance on the part of marginalized Other. A quintessential picture of the dichotomized existence is that of Ugunu worksite “a transplanted European high-class township in the Niger Delta forest” for the staff of Bell Oil Company:

...residents had their own electric plants that catered for them constantly. Those living there knew nothing of power outage that plagued the rest of the country. ...The township residents could not also rely on the water corporation and so had boreholes that provided them adequate and constant supply of water... Parks and swimming pools were there for relaxation....The food and drinks were highly subsidized by the company to increase the morale and subsequently the productivity of workers (276, 277).

While the statement above is about the high living standard of the workers of Bell Oil Company, reflecting the wealth from oil, the living conditions of the people of the host community separated from the Ugunu site by a concrete fence contrasts sharply the riches from their soil as:

[...] the local villagers fetch water from the Ugunu River, brown from chemicals of oil exploration for bathing and cooking needs”. At night the villagers saw from a distance the ever-glowing light in the Bell Oil residential enclave. Bright floodlights shone from electric poles over the concrete wall to ensure that any intruder would be caught before any serious attempt was made to infiltrate the complex (276).

These images of dichotomised existence are deliberately captured in text to present the multinational oil companies as unfeeling to the pitiable state of their host community and validate the author's negotiation changes in the environment and the living condition of the people of the Niger Delta region. The depictions of the contrasting living standard of the staff of the multinational oil companies and their people of host communities are consistent with Ojaide's position on the role of literature that it should be able to draw attention to the gap between the rich and the poor (*Poetic Imagination* 42).

Further conflicting pictures are unveiled as the narrative move from the Niger Delta, moves to Holland, the home country of Bell Oil Company, when Dennis Ishaka, a senior engineer of Niger Delta origin that is a staff of a company, is posted to Holland. In opposition to the environment of Niger Delta that is degraded, that of Netherlands as seen by Dennis is still pristine. The water retains its natural beauty, "compared to what had happened to the creeks and rivers of the Niger Delta" (*Activist* 293). The "Dutch forests were still fresh despite the centuries past, the trees had grown, unlike the dying forests of the Niger Delta." (*Activist* 293) The deployment of the contradictory pictures seems to be tethered to the "outsider" and "insiders" epithets earlier mentioned as they serve as a part of the tinder for the subversive eco-activism engaged in by the two major characters in the text, the Activist and Ebi Emasheyi.

The resistance is underscored in the narrative through further contrasting portrayals of "the past" (pre-oil Niger Delta) and the present (oil exploration Niger Delta). This yoking of the "past" and "the present" in the text, also serves as a motif through which the writer intends to create an effect in the mind of the readers as it does in the characters in the text. The antithesis between "the past" and "the present" Niger Delta environment and their effects on the characters are explored in the Activist's reminiscence during a picnic. During their picnic on a countryside beach, the Activist and Ebi, the heroine, discover to their chagrin that the deleterious activities of the multinational oil companies have greatly degraded the erstwhile rich natural environment. They wonder:

Where were the flying fish that used to shoot out of the water into the air and then somersault back into the water? ... 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 the oil industries or migrated downstream to the ocean. Where were the flock of storks, kingfishers, and many exotic birds that filled the airspace as one approached the ocean? "...Things have changed so drastically that we might lose everything we knew from our youth just in a few years to come,..." (*Activist* 90, 91, 93)

The comparison of "the past" and "the present" is a deliberate subversive stratagem as evidenced in the effect of the contrast on the duo as the Activist reacts to Ebi's call for prayer as the solution to the anomaly, "This will take more than prayers to resolve. We, the owners of the place, have to force the oil companies and the Federal Military Government to start doing something about it before it is too late" (*Activist* 93).

The duo's later eco-activism is a consequence of the stimulation of the comparison of the present and the past as they become determined to negotiate a better environment for their people.

The dialectics between "the past" and "the present" is also explored through the complaints of the women of the Niger Delta when the women meet under the umbrella of WODEFOR (Women of the Delta Forum) to negotiate a change in their oil-generated misfortune. Some parallel words are recurrent the complaints of the women against the multinational oil companies operating in the region. The repeated words are "now" or, "recent" and the "past" or "before". While the referent "now" or "recent" is associated with the days of oil exploration and their noxious effects on humans, the flora and fauna; the allusion to the "past" is connected to the years-long preceding the discovery and exploration of oil in the area. Below are a few cases of the repetition of these two contrasting words.

In Matije's, a participant at the forum of women, complaint, the use of "now" is an obvious comparison of the present with the past. She complains, "Your husband may look well, many of our men are now sick. Newly married young women see for ourselves what is happening. To be blunt about it, our men are losing their manhood at a very early. How can old men be stronger than young men?" (*Activist 221*) In this statement, the comparison of the past and present is implied in the use of "now" in the first part and is evidenced in the last part of the complaint in the parallel between old men and young men. The former being stronger than the latter underlines the reason for the writer's attempt to reverse their subjectivity precipitated by the exploration of oil in the region. Mrs Taylor's (the coordinator of the women) grievance also reveals a comparison between the past and the present as she says:

"Our mothers did not complain of anything inside their bodies. I don't know whether those of you that are past childbearing like me feel it, but I live daily with new condition. It is as if a fire is blazing inside me. I have heard others complain of the same burning that our educated sisters called hot flashes. Where did those flashes hide before oil came in to our lives? Imagine me roasting in the harmattan cold! The discomfort of being a woman has definitely increased with the discovery of oil in our backyard [...]". (*Activist 221*)

The contrast between the past and the present as revealed by the women's complaints presupposes the writer's preference for the years before the discovery and exploration of oil in the Niger Delta. This is succinctly concluded in the statement, "The older women narrated what life was Bell Oil Company arrived. That was not too long ago, according to them, before 1958. They once lived in a paradise that had disappeared with the oil boom." (*Activist 221*) This conclusion is redolent of Achebe's recapturing of African past in his epic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, as beautiful, destroyed at the coming of the white man.

The comparison of the past and the present consequently is a counter hegemonic strategy by which Ojaide demands a reversal in the plight of the people of the Niger Delta area. This demand is couched in the resolve of the women at the end of their meeting:

The women primed themselves for action. They would look for ways to talk to the oil companies to persuade them to arrest the deteriorating environmental situation in the Niger Delta. They would also address the military government about their concerns. They knew that would be a difficult task because the soldiers in government did not respect women. They saw women only as sex mates and would push hard for a meaningful discussion, but they would do their possible best. If the talks with the oil companies and the military government failed, they would look for unconventional ways to compel them to act. They would start with persuasion but if that failed, they would have to confronting those ruining them and their environment with the power they possessed. (*Activist* 223, 224)

### **Binary within the Oppressed as an Instrument of Change**

Marxist ideology is strident in Ojaide's imaginative writings and this, no doubt, in *The Activist*, serves as a backdrop to his interpretation of the intercourse between the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian military government and the people of the Niger Delta a duality between the oppressor(s) oppressed. His Marxian lenses also discern binaries and cleavages within the rank of Nigerian marginal Others, particularly those in the Niger Delta – cleavages instigated by interethnic rancor. Interestingly, these differences are captured in the texts through bipartite Niger Delta ethnic nationalities such as Itsekiri and Ijo; Urhobo and Itsekiri and Ijo and Urhobo. On the part of the oppressed, he advocates the stitching of the fissions as they are bound by the same fate of exploitation from the multinational oil companies and the Federal Military Government. He, therefore, advocates the exploitation of bipartite ethnic heritage or cleavages for the altering of their marginal position. He illustrates this through Ebi Emasheyi, one of the props of the forum, who is a fusion of the Ijo and Urhobo blood.

The positive exploitation of the duality on the part of the oppressed is further expressed in the conjugal bond between the Activist, an Urhobo and Ebi, an ethnic mix of Ijo and Urhobo. Pere, the Activist's barely literate partner, is also of dual parentage – an Ijo mother and an Urhobo father. He picks Tosan, an Urhobo woman, as his wife. These marriages among men and women of different ethnic nationalities are symbolic amplification of Ojaide's vision of the unification of the marginalized with subjugation as their common denominator. Their unity is fundamental for the overthrow of their common foes. The same advocacy is explored in the conflation of two sets of people with antithetical generational, ideological persuasions, and pedagogical stratum. The first pair of Dr. Mukoro, a lecturer father, and Omagbemi, his university student son are polarised

by pedagogical stratum and ideological leanings, however, they are brought together for the common good of their region. Similarly, the Activist and Ebi who are opposite of genders belonging to unparalleled academic rungs – the Activist, an Associate Professor and Ebi, a junior academic – are stitched together in the narrative to mediate the common destiny of the marginalized.

These sundry binaries examined above unveil yet another role Ojaide employs them to perform in the text. The binary on the part of the oppressed is exploited to their advantage vis-à-vis their intercourse with their perceived exploiters. His advocacy for an alliance among the oppressed people of the Niger Delta may have been birthed by the collaboration of the exploiters he has highlighted – the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian military rulers.

## **Conclusion**

Ojaide is a socially committed writer whose commitment is quite loud in his creative engagements. He does this in the novel through his configuration of the Niger Delta as a site of contestation between postcolonial Self represented by multinational oil companies and Nigerian government; and a postcolonial Other designated as the Niger Delta. The contest is captured essentially in the deployment of bipartite motifs, especially in the use of contrasting words. Such words as mobilized by either side of the divide are to demonize or exclude the other to solely appropriate or expropriate the riches from the oil in the Niger Delta region. In the assertion of ownership, positive or negative words are redefined by both contestants to have opposite meanings. Consequently, illegitimate actions are labeled legitimate, depending on side of the dichotomy to which the initiator of such acts belongs. By such redefinition of words or actions, morality is made to stand on its head.

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## **The Article**

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