

# ECO-PANDEMICS, HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION AND PROTEST IN NIGER DELTA

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## Abstract

Protest is unavoidable in any environment that is rife with injustice and human rights violation irrespective of space, race and status. The agitation in the Niger Delta is a reaction of the people to human rights violation wrought in the region by oil exploitation. Environmental degradation that is caused by oil spills and gas flares has resulted in the spread of economic and socio-political challenges across the Niger Delta just as the COVID 19 pandemic spreads across the world. While the later received urgent attention and intervention, the former has not despite having been in existence over many decades in the region. This study, therefore, metaphorically conceives the effects of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta as eco-pandemics and aims at investigating the reason why the fictional Niger Delta in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* has not received the required attention like many parts of the world that were affected by COVID 19 pandemic had, and also to find out why the intervention-seeking strategies of the characters in the text fail to yield desired results. This investigation was carried out through a literary examination of *The Activist* from an eco-Marxist perspective. This study concludes that, just as the spread of COVID 19 pandemic was urgently checked, the factors responsible for the spread of eco-pandemics in the Niger Delta require to be addressed with a sense of urgency for meaningful progress to be recorded in the region.

**Keywords:** Eco-Marxism, Eco-pandemics, Niger Delta Literature, Literature and Environment

## Introduction

One of the most recent issues in the developed and developing nations of the world is the COVID 19 pandemic. It constitutes a global challenge as it puts every nation of the world on her toes. Individuals and nations sought and got interventions and the phenomenon has been curbed to a manageable level. There is no established and clearly verified opinion about the cause of the COVID 19 pandemic but one indisputable fact about it is that its effects are global. Its impacts were felt by the rich, poor, educated, uneducated, white, black, old and young. Many parts of the world received interventions including vaccines. Some received drugs and other medical materials and equipment for the treatment of infected persons. Governments provided isolation centres as one of the mitigation measures. Some individuals gave huge financial as well as material donations to governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were directly involved in the fight against the COVID 19 pandemic. Although the pandemic has not yet been totally eradicated from the world, its further spread has, to a great extent, been checked by these interventions.

Human rights are “those rights which the international community recognizes as belonging to all individuals by the very fact of their humanity” (Okoye 50). Basic human rights are universal in the sense that irrespective of one’s cultural or ethnic background, sex, race, status (economic, political, educational, and religious), s/he is entitled to those rights. Some of these rights include right to life, right to equal treatment, right to freedom from exploitation, right to education, among others. To illustrate further, article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights states that ‘all human beings are born free and equal’; this particular one is violated in Nigeria where people from the Niger Delta are perceived and treated as minority. In this case, their rights to equal treatment are violated.

This violation results to protest as a reactionary measure from the people. Uzoma Okoye avers that violation of human rights in the Niger Delta “ignites feelings of indignation, resentment and

disappointment” (50) and its consequent “agitation [from the people of the region]” (Sesan 186). The people agitate because they feel that their rights have been violated. The opinions of Okoye and Sesan suggest that the agitation in the Niger Delta is caused by the negligence as well as insensitivity of oil companies and the Nigerian government towards the Niger Delta people.

The Niger Delta people are not happy that the oil wealth from their land is used to develop other parts of Nigeria while their region has the worst experience of injustice in terms of economic, educational, socio-political, and infrastructural development. This unfair treatment forces their youths to engage in agitations against what they perceive as violation of their rights as a people. They kidnap oil company workers and vandalise oil pipelines as their major modes of protest. They believe that engaging in such activities would attract attention and intervention to their plight.

Although Somtochukwu Metu agrees that “kidnapping of the expatriates working in the oil companies is a major pre-occupation of the Area Boys” (33), she questions the motive behind such mode of agitation because it is not truly in the interest of the entire people of the region but for their individual benefits. To substantiate her point, she notes that “they built up personal wealth from the proceeds of ransoms, which the companies paid secretly even though they publicly deny dealing with armed gangs and terrorists” (33). Azeez Sesan concurs with Metu on the notion that some Niger Delta youths explore the negative situation in the region to their advantage. He notes that “hostage-taking and gun-running are not strange to some individuals and the militant youths” (193). Azeez’s observation suggests that the youths engage in these negative activities under the guise of fighting for their rights, but in reality, they use the situation for their individual advantages. Inyingifaa, one of the Niger Delta militants in Ahmed Yerima’s *Hard Ground*, is a good example of an individual who maximizes the violent situation in the region for his economic gain. He takes advantage of the militancy in the Niger Delta to engage in gun-running business; he is not interested in the

collective struggle of the people of the Niger Delta. This is why when he hears that some militant youths have been caught and killed by government security agents he only laments the negative effects of the crisis on his gun-running business.

In the same vein, Nurudeen Lawal argues that “... recurring violence in the [Niger Delta] area is borne out of egoistic interests among the contending forces in the region” (167). He further explains that “... the militants who claim to represent the oppressed citizens in the crisis employ violence to advance their personal interests” (182). The rape of Mukume (a female character) by Niger Delta militants in Yerima’s *Little Drop* validates Lawal’s argument that some youths of the region take advantage of the crisis to advance their personal interests. In addition, the egocentric acts of the Niger Delta youths popularly known as “Men of the Alphabet” in May Nwoye’s *Oil Cemetery* supports the opinion that some people of the region are not sincerely committed to their collective struggle as Lawal and others observe. They are interested in the pursuit of individual gains. The Men of the Alphabet collect huge amounts of money from the oil companies as compensation in the guise of being the people’s representatives but use it to make themselves richer at the detriment of the people.

Furthermore, Metu notes that Niger Delta youths engage in pipeline vandalism which they believe would “aid in milking the ... oil compan[ies] dry and always make [them] count ... losses” (34). While she believes that such an approach would “... draw the attention of both local and international bodies to the plight of the people of Niger Delta” (32), this study questions the feasibility of such an attention-seeking approach in bringing a permanent solution to the environmental crisis and its negative effects on the region. Engaging in pipeline vandalism as a way of making oil companies to lose more quantities of oil does not seem sensible in proffering a lasting solution to the environmental challenges in the Niger Delta; it rather makes the situation worse. Considering the fact that the federal government always ensures that well-armed security agents are available in that

region to protect oil installations, and any suspect might suffer imprisonment, brutality, and even death, it would not be easy to carry out that kind of plan; even if it is carried out, it does not have any direct positive impact on the people. Rather, it has a negative impact as oil spillage from the vandalised pipelines contributes to degradation of the Niger Delta eco-system. It would, ironically, amount to destroying what they are trying to protect. Employing pipeline vandalism and kidnapping as intervention-seeking strategies are only beneficial to the few militants; they are not feasibly appropriate in bringing a lasting solution to the environmental problems in the Niger Delta.

### **Environmental Degradation and Human Rights Violation: The Niger Delta's predicament**

Exploration and exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta make life unbearable for both humans and non-humans. Pollution of land and rivers that occurs from the activities has led to “drops of blood [to] flow into a long river of tragedy, especially in the violent conflict among warring local groups ... and ... the government” (Adeoti 301). Economic challenges such as abject poverty, unemployment, and hardship abound. Social problems such as armed robbery, rape, kidnapping, prostitution and militancy now appear to be normal activities in that region. Commenting generally on the situation of the Niger Delta in the wake of oil exploitation, Simon et al stress that “the neglect of the region 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” (384). The above assertion underscores the point that both the activities of government and oil companies on one hand and the activities of the Niger Delta youths on the other hand have negatively contributed to the predicament of the region. The Niger Delta, despite being the host of crude oil which is the main revenue-generating source for Nigerian government, has continued to suffer what Yemi Atanda describes as “confusion and contradiction” (133).

The situation of the people is contradictorily miserable when compared to the massive oil wealth that is being extracted from the region daily. Enajite Ojaruega illustrates the contradiction thus:

While the Niger Delta region provide the Federal Nigerian Government billions of dollars from oil and gas with to develop other areas of the country, it is sad to note that the region continues to wallow in penury as there are little or no developmental programmes put in place to improve the lot of the people. This is clearly example of a blessing turned to a curse as the people are perpetually oppressed and left in a marginalized state in spite of generating so much revenue for the nation. (496)

It is contradictory that wealth from the region is used to development other parts of Nigeria, yet the region suffers worst conditions of living. It is also contradictory that in a region where multinational companies are established, the Niger Delta people suffer chronic unemployment and its consequent frustration and hardship-induced social vices. A report of the Amnesty International confirms the above opinion to be true by revealing that:

Widespread and unchecked human rights violation related to the oil industry have pushed many people deeper into poverty and deprivation, fuelled conflict and led to pervasive sense of powerlessness and frustration.... This pollution which has affected the area for decades has damaged the soil, water and air quality. Hundreds of thousands of people are affected, particularly ... those who rely on traditional livelihoods such as fishing and agriculture. (9)

The above observation affirms that what actually triggers agitation in the Niger Delta is the violation of the people's human rights. This is evident in the destruction of the people's means of livelihood and disruption of their entire ecosystem. This makes life harder and forces them to engage in protests to defend their land and demand their rights.

Sunny Awhefeada, in concurrence, avows that oil exploitation in the Niger Delta has many negative effects for the region. He laments that it "has become the harbinger of poverty, disease, death, pollution, extinction of biodiversity, loss of means of livelihood,

agitation, restiveness, militancy, criminality, and varying degrees of ecocide pointing in the direction of Armageddon” (96). His argument, apart from economic austerity, attests that extraction of crude oil also has health implications on the people of the region. The people drink contaminated water, inhale polluted air and suffer a lot of ailments thereafter. Al Gedicks concurs that the disadvantages of oil business establishment in the Niger Delta have outweighed its advantages. He observes that:

In the cases of oil extraction in the Niger Delta of Nigeria... there is an inseparable connection between the assault on the environment and the assault on human rights. In all of these cases, multinational oil companies have not only degraded the environment but colluded with the government of these countries to deny native people their basic political and civil rights to resist environmental damage that threatens their subsistence and their very survival. (41)

It is discernible from the above expression that agitation in the Niger Delta is caused by violation of human rights and the reactions it generates. The people engage in protests to express their discontent over political marginalization and economic exploitation against their region. Nurudeen Lawal describes the protests as “revolutionary struggle” from various groups who adopt confrontational approaches in demanding justice (170). They resort to employing some strategies like destruction of crude oil installations, abduction of workers of oil companies among others when their peaceful efforts to getting the attention of the government and the oil companies fail.

### **Theoretical Framework: Eco-Marxism**

The term Eco-Marxism was first coined by Justus Von Liebig, a German chemist, who used it to describe how unfavourable farming methods caused depletion of soil in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eco-Marxism is the application of Karl Marx’s Marxist theoretical approach to the study of ecology based texts. It takes into consideration the representation of environment related issues, their impacts and the reactions they generate in a literary work. Eco-Marxists are against exploitation of nature for the sole advantage of human beings, which

is a reflection of capitalist agenda. They are against egocentric motives of capitalists who monopolize means of production and use workers to achieve their gain-motive through exploitation, injustice and inequality. Capitalists focus their attention on profit-making to the detriment of nature and human beings as in the case of the Niger Delta. Eco-Marxism encourages workers to take revolutionary actions against capitalists in order to take the centre stage in the control of means of production for the realisation of a peaceful society where human beings and nature would thrive harmoniously. In this regard, Roberts Alan makes a case for a green ban in which he “encourages the working class to take action by refusing to participate in ecological harmful projects” (95).

This study inquires how feasible Alan’s Eco-Marxist proposition is to the situation of the Niger Delta people, considering the high rate of poverty, unemployment and chronic hardship ravaging the region. How possible is it to encourage the people from poverty-stricken communities in the Niger Delta to quit their jobs as drivers, cleaners, cooks, and other menial workers in the oil companies whose activities are ecologically degrading? How would such people survive in the absence of alternative means of livelihood since their original sources of sustenance (farmland and rivers) have been polluted? How possible is it to convince the oppressed and depressed people of the Niger Delta to quit activities like breaking of oil pipelines for oil pilfering and abduction of oil company workers, which they believe are attention/intervention-seeking strategies considering the indifferent attitudes of the oil companies towards their plight? How possible would it be to convince the suffering people of the Niger Delta to quit farming and fishing activities, which are their sources of sustenance, even though such activities contribute to the extinction of elements of nature (plants and animals)? The fact is that the Niger Delta people cannot do without farming and fishing because even in the pre-oil era, these were their core means of livelihood. This implies that the degradation of nature pre-dates capitalism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. The people have been



engaging in these activities even before oil exploitation and its attendant effects hit the region. Based on the above established points, the Eco-Marxist postulation of Alan would not be completely applicable to the situation of the people of the Niger Delta but it would be useful in spurring the people to engage in activism to challenge “the violation of environmental rights and create awareness ... [towards its amelioration]” (Ojaruega 36).

### **Why has the Niger Delta not received the required attention and intervention?**

The African postcolonial situation in general and that of Nigeria in particular would better be explained by the dictatorial leadership and its consequent revolution in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, where a tyrannical ruler, Mr Jones, is overthrown and replaced by another, Napoleon, who is expected to be better but instead becomes as oppressive as the former. Napoleon changes the already existing laws to suit his selfish dictatorial leadership evident in one of the laws which reads, ‘all animals are equal but some are more equal than others’. This superiority complex makes him to see himself better than others whom he perceives are inferior to him in every aspect and as a result exerts control over them. The situation is analogous to the situation of the Nigeria’s Niger Delta where:

Shell ... [in collaboration with the Nigerian government] perpetrates acts of suppression and estrangement of the people of the host communities in the Niger Delta with impunity because of the [perceived] minority status of the people and the prevalence of ethnic politics in the country that also works against ethnic minorities vis-a-vis the control of political and economic power [in Nigeria against the people]. (Cliff 66)

It is glaring in the position of Cliff that political and economic management in Nigeria is ingrained in inequality and injustice; this is why the Niger Delta has not received the required attention like many parts of the world that were plagued by COVID 19 pandemic. The Nigerian society is highly stratified; some geopolitical zones as well as some ethnic groups are perceived as minorities. This perception

clearly reflects how such zones and ethnic groups are treated in every facet of the society. Ayo Akinfe laments that:

... in Nigeria, the Ijaw man is not considered an equal. He is not considered a contemporary, a colleague, a mate, or a friend but a subordinate. Other Nigerians trample on us as if we are maggots . . . all the evidence shows that for the last forty years, we have been the foot mat of the country. We are the goose that lays the golden egg, yet we have the worst nest in the swamp. Other Nigerian kids swim in swimming pools, but ours swim in oil-polluted waters. They have bridges, we have wooden planks; they have roads, we have weed-covered streams; they have electricity, we have bush lamps. (53-54)

Marginalization against the Niger Delta is not unconnected to the perceived prejudiced minority status of the region and its consequent suppression, exploitation, and oppression by the Nigerian government. It also reveals why the protest against human rights violation and the effects of environmental degradation, which have spread across the region just like COVID 19 pandemic, have not yielded a desired result.

The Nigerian government perceives the people of Niger Delta as ‘minority’ and as a result, always uses ‘federal might’ to suppress them whenever they want to protest against the violation of their fundamental human rights. Atanda notes that such a violent approach is not good because, it leads to “destruction of lives and properties” (sic) in the region (131). He makes references to the massacre of Ogoni people in 1994 and 1999 as well as the cruel execution of a renowned Niger Delta human right/environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others, in 1995 to substantiate his point. Lawal reiterates that the protest in the Niger Delta is “[f]ueled by the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni activists in 1995 ... [who] staged protests against what they perceived as socio-economic exploitation, political marginalization and social injustice [against the region]” (168). The minority perception and its consequent intimidation are used as tools to sustain dominance of the capitalists and their allies.

It is depicted in *The Activist* that the Federal Military Government neither pays attention to the economic austerity in the Niger Delta nor take the necessary actions required to curb the social vices that are brought about by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. However, the government urgently sends armed security agents to intimidate and silence the Niger Delta people whenever they come out to protest. Pere, a character in *The Activist*, notices the “mobile police, the army boys, and the foreign planes with military men [are] wielding strange guns and binoculars flying over the airspace. Their presence in the oil-rich area amounted to blatant intimidation and robbery” (152). A good example to further illustrate this point is when a fire outbreak, which is caused by “oil blowout, exacerbated by a pipe leakage and fuelled by gas flares ...” occurs in Ekakpamre community in the text. The oil company demonstrates high level of negligence and insensitivity by not making any effort to quench the fire (260). It is noticed that:

Bell Oil knew very well that there was a blowout but did not ask its fire-fighting team to put out the fire. The Uto River was literary burning. Evergreen plant, dry leaves, and shrubs that stood by the river all became combustible materials. The poisonous methane gas fumes engulfed plants, wildfire, and humans around for days. Houses in the riverside town were threatened. ... The townspeople stood the chance of losing many of their homes. (Ojaide, 261)

The intensity of the fire has the capacity to wipe out the whole community but Bell Oil does not make any effort to quench it. The unresponsive attitude of the oil company is a clear proof that it is not interested in the welfare of the metaphoric goose (the Niger Delta) but in the egg that it lays (oil wealth). The situation puts the community in a state of pandemonium. Human beings, plants and animals in the community are pathetically affected by the fire. It is observed that:

The residents found themselves helpless before this monstrous fire. They were all black from the sooth of smoke and ashes. There were many premature births because some pregnant women went into sudden labour. Babies coughed relentlessly. The old wheezed. Eyes itched and those already with poor eyesight had their problems worsened by the fire and smoke. No one was safe from the fuming blaze. (Ojaide 261)

The people of the community engage in a protest in order to draw the attention of the oil company to their plight but this does not yield any result. The federal military government only *immediately sends security agents to the community and many protesters are intimidated and killed.*

The incidence prompts the women of the Niger Delta to insist that such violation of human rights in the region must stop. They start a nude protest, which is reported on CNN international news, and in less than an hour, the news spreads around the world and Bell Oil immediately sends fire-fighters to quench the fire which has burnt for twelve days. This shows that the voice of the people of the Niger Delta does not count in Nigeria where they are perceived and treated as minority. The above reason reveals why the federal government and the multinationals refuse to respond to the cry of the people for fairness and intervention just as was done for many parts of the country during the period of COVID 19.

A similar occurrence is noticed in Vincent Egbuson's *Love My Planet*. An activist group known as "Simple Justice" abducts a Briton as a strategy to force the government to fix the roads of the oil region which are in a dilapidated condition. The wife of the Briton makes a passionate appeal to the activists to release her diabetic and hypertensive husband so that he could take his routine drugs. When her husband is released, she thanks the activists for their humane approach but wonders "why the government of a wealthy country like Daglobe could not do a simple thing as filling the potholes in a road that connected five oil-producing states whose oil provided 90% of the nation's revenue" (237). Surprisingly, after the expression of the Briton about the unfair treatment of the Daglobe Delta, filling of potholes is commenced on the East-West Road *the next day* "because a foreigner had said what the Daglobeans had been saying [but are not listened to]" (Egbuson 237). This shows that the display of insensitivity and negligence against the Niger Delta is linked to the disregard that the government has for the people of the region who are perceived as minority. This reveals why the Niger Delta has not

received the necessary attention that is required to check eco-pandemics in the region despite having been in existence for many decades before the recent COVID 19 pandemic emerged.

### **Why do the intervention-seeking strategies of characters in *The Activist* fail to yield desired results?**

As portrayed in *The Activist*, the environmental damage caused by the activities of crude oil industries and the reaction it generates are the main causes of the agitation and consequent insecurity in the Niger Delta. The situation is aggravated by the lack of concern exhibited by the oil companies and the Nigerian government towards the plight of the people. This makes the people to firmly resolve to unite in a fight against the perpetrators by adopting more confrontational strategies. The oil companies and the Nigerian government on the other hand are determined to employ any strategy to ensure the continuity of the oil business in the region. They use discord as a tool to distract the people from pursuing their common goal in unison. An instance is seen in *The Activist* where the Federal Military Government shares fish nets just to cause commotion among the people. This makes the people to fight and kill one another instead of their common enemies. This time, crisis takes a different angle - ethnic clash breaks out in the Niger Delta after sharing of fishing nets sent by the Federal Military Government. Each of the major ethnic group in Warri - The Itsekiri, Izon and Urhobo claims to have been cheated in the sharing of the nets. The ethnic groups start fighting against one another. During the period of the conflict, ownership of Warri becomes contentious among the groups. Mayhem breaks out in Warri as “[h]ouses were set ablaze. Flames ... leapt from one roof to another indiscriminately. The flames... covered the whole town with clouds of smoke” (232). None of the three ethnic groups is safe in Warri because of the chaos that erupts from the strife. During the crisis:

Heinous atrocities took place. Breast of women and genitals of rival groups were hacked off. Pregnant women were disemboweled and the

premature babies torn off and thrown into street gutters to die. Izon with Itsekiri wives, Itsekiri women with Izon or Urhobo husbands, and Itsekiri husbands with Izon or Urhobo wives were asked to kill their spouses with machete or poison. (Ojaide 232-233)

The Federal Military Government does not intervene in the situation until a lot of damage has taken place. Killings occur throughout a whole week. The sharing of fish nets is deliberately strategized by the government to distract the people from their collective struggle. The people's sense of reasoning is beclouded by the deceptive benevolence of fish net sharing, because there is no fish in the polluted rivers. Strife and its consequent vindictive mayhems account for the failure of intervention-seeking approaches of the characters in the text.

Unbearable economic hardship in the Niger Delta is one of the major factors that cause the intervention-seeking efforts of the character in *The Activist* to fail. The youths of the region are forced into unwholesome activities by economic severity. Akinfe, in confirming the reason why some youths engage in militancy, believes that somebody like "Tarila only joined the NDLM [an activist group] to keep body and soul together. [It is] ... believed that if offered the means of sustaining himself, such a man has no need to take up arms against the government" (104). The denial of their rights to a healthy environment and its benefits also forces the youths to employ some strategies that are unfavourable to the region's environment in demanding their rights. For instance, The Activist, the protagonist of the novel, *The Activist*, "saw bunkering as a weapon against the two principal outsiders that are robbing and destroying the people of the Niger Delta" (155). In fact, he wishes that the Federal Military Government "bleed[s] to death" and loses much of its oil revenue that had been sustaining the dictatorship" in Nigeria and confining the Niger Delta to subjugation margin (157). The Activist and Pere "wanted the oil to be used to develop the area. Since that was not happening, whatever could be done to hurt the oil companies and the federal Military Government was fair game" (154).

Although their thought seems reasonable to them but they fail to realise that the quantity of oil that spills in the process of the theft would also contribute in degrading the Niger Delta environment. Pere, Owumi and The Activist see oil pilfering as a way of taking back what is rightfully theirs. However, they fail to consider the fact that the act also contributes to defeating the aim of their struggle in as much as it is not environment friendly. Breaking of oil pipelines and its consequent oil spillage does not affect the government only; it degrades the environment more and increases the agony of the people who rely on its resources for survival. This approach is like using a wrong medication to treat an ailment and expecting to get well.

In addition, many people of the Niger Delta are interested in the welfare of the region but intolerable living conditions force them to engage in some acts that sabotage the people's collective struggle and make their intervention-strategy futile. Some are given huge financial or political offers by the government as well as the oil companies just to buy them over to the side of the oppressors. An instance is when Karibi and Tarila are bribed by the multinationals and the security agents in order to divulge relevant information that would enable the government to track down the leader of an activist group in Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires*. The bribe is intended to make the recipients break away from the activist group and be lured to the side of the government to betray their brotherhood in the struggle. This sabotages and frustrates the collective struggle of the oppressed and the saying that 'united would stand and divided would fall' would definitely become the case. Material or non-material inducement is easily used as a tool of coercion to distract the Niger Delta people and frustrate their intervention-seeking efforts because of poverty. Direct or indirect bribing of the poor indigenes of the Niger Delta would make them to easily betray their fellows and makes the intervention-seeking efforts fail.

Besides, the Niger Delta youths who would have been sustained by farming and fishing are compelled into oil pilfering, abduction and other social vices by unemployment and its consequent

hardship in the region. Haggard looking Owumi in *The Activist* who “could barely take two meals a day some years earlier” is forced into oil theft by joblessness and his life becomes better (149). He usually sends his boys to “break pipes and from the outflow filled his tanker. He sold some on his way to town and emptied the remainder into underground tanks” (148). He confesses that “[t]he world is not waiting for anybody and I had to join this business to make ends meet. I could not remain poor and desperate all my life when the means were there to improve my lot” (149). In addition, the novelist also uses the involvement of some rich Niger Delta men in oil theft to establish the fact that the people are not totally exonerated from the blame of ecological pollution in the region. Pere discovers that a prominent man like:

Chief Goodluck Ede whose wealth filled so many banks in recent years and was a frequent donor to philanthropic organisations was also in the bunkering business. He had a fleet of the most expensive cars that included Cadillac, Rover and Jaguar in his palatial mansion in Ometan Street. ... he gave out right and left even bigger amounts on subsequent occasions. (Ojaide 150)

Ojaide, in *The Activist*, portrays Chief Goodluck Ede in the above light to further illustrate that some rich Niger Delta men engage in oil pilfering because of greed. With the selfish acts of some people of the Niger Delta who place personal interests above the region’s welfare, it would be difficult for the intervention-seeking approaches of the people of the Niger Delta to yield a desire result.

### **Protest against Eco-pandemics and Human Rights Violation in Ojaide’s *The Activist***

Ojaide’s *The Activist* depicts a paradoxical situation of Niger Delta people who live in an area where the lucrative crude oil is extracted but suffer unbearable poverty. Some cities in the oil-rich region which were baptized ‘garden cities’ have become ‘agony cities’ because of untold hardship that oil exploitation has brought upon the region. It is depicted in *The Activist* that one of the negative effects of



oil exploitation is that it causes the people to be occupationally displaced. Unemployment and economic related challenges hit the region and the people suffer the pathetic impacts. Before the commencement of oil business in Niger Delta, the people live in peace and abundance. Food, water and healthy air which sustain the people are provided by nature. The different types of food that help to nourish the body were available. Ebi, a female character in *The Activist*, nostalgically recalls a list of luxuries of the past and wonders:

What happened to our oil-beans, breadfruit, mushroom, urhurhu grapes, owe apple, and otie cherry fruit? Either gone or barely available! What are the water-leaf, greens, water yam, ikpaho groundnuts, lemon leaves, plantation peas, okpeyin yam, taro roots, and sweet cassava that were such a pleasure to eat? (Ojaide 104)

The childhood experience of *The Activist* (protagonist of the novel) equally confirms that things were better during the time when oil had not been discovered and traded in Niger Delta. He recalls that there was no famine in the years of his childhood. At that time, “[p]eople were robust and healthy. One did not need to buy so many good things; they were either readily available from the soil and waters ...” (105). But these natural gifts of the soil, rivers and their inhabitants are forced into extinction by oil pollution. *The Activist* becomes worried about how the:

... lakes and wetlands have been filled, first with rubber trees, trees then now road and developments that left the people hungry, diseased, malnourished, and alienated from their root. Now the oil companies are pouring poisons into them, giving these natural sustainers of the people a final deathblow. (Ojaide 104)

Chief Tobi Ishaka similarly affirms that the people “even lived better in the days before this abundance of oil” (140). In a meeting held to deliberate on the plights of the people, Niger Delta women point out that:

Pipes had been laid across groves, villages, and towns, intruding into the private spaces of animal, plant, and human populations. All the storks, kingfishers, weaverbirds, sunbirds, and many others had disappeared. The

herbs and flowers were almost gone and only the old remembered them by their names. Simple herbs that cured many ailments had disappeared with the coming of oil. ... In addition to losing curatives for known ailments, new sicknesses had come in without known cures. (Ojaide 242-243)

Poverty-induced sicknesses and vices have also become the lots of the people. The region, if compared with other parts of Nigeria, could not boast of tangible development in terms of good road networks, good health facilities, portable water, electricity, well-equipped schools, recreational facilities and other social amenities that make life worthwhile.

The novelist, through the exposition of the selfishness that is inherent in capitalism, artistically x-rays how the region is entrapped in injustice. He reveals how the people from the international community and other parts of Nigeria are gainfully employed in the oil companies but the people of the region suffer a high rate of unemployment. Even when they are employed, they are only allowed to do menial jobs while the main petroleum engineering is carried out by foreigners thereby totally denying them the real knowledge of oil extraction. Chief Ishaka, in *The Activist*, laments that:

... all the engineers were white people. The few Nigerians at the senior staff level were administrators, including the community development officers, who knew nothing about how the oil was extracted from the soil. The foreign engineers used the middle-ranked workers trained at the Petroleum Training Institute at Effurun to do the tedious job without teaching them the full knowledge of drilling ... Who would protect the creeks, streams, and rivers more than the children of fishermen and women? (Ojaide 178)

With this in mind, Chief Ishaka sends his son to study petroleum engineering. This is to enable him gain adequate knowledge of oil exploration and exploitation so that he can drill oil in their family land but this dream is in vain. Having graduated as a petroleum engineer, Dennis Ishaka is employed in Bell Oil Company. He is only allowed to “share in all the luxuries, privileges and benefits of the company but not in its technical expertise and experience”

(299). For the oil boss, “allowing him to acquire technical drilling experience would be suicidal for the expatriate staff and business” (299). This is a subtle way of keeping the people of the Niger Delta permanently alienated from the means of oil production in order to perpetuate the capitalist’s agenda of monopoly of means of production and dominance over the people. These acts of injustice push the people to engage in “... protests and ... confrontations in defence of their inalienable rights” as Eco-Marxists uphold (Atanda 130). It is a well-known fact that the capitalist motive of being in control of means of production is to maximize profit to the detriment of the workers. In the same way, means of crude oil production in the Niger Delta and its wealth are in the hands multinationals in collaboration with the Nigerian government to the disadvantage of the people of the region. They are not concerned about how “the people of the oil-bearing communities have continued to live their lives in a manner that is antithetical to the wealth from the bowels of their land” (Cliff 64). This forces the oppressed to engage in protest to demand their rights.

Conflict in *The Activist* is caused by the unjust acts of the Federal Military Government alongside the multinationals in the fictional Niger Delta. The oppressed engage in protests to express their dissatisfaction about the despoliation of the environment and its eco-pandemic effects on the people. The protests represent rejection of inequality, exploitation, oppression and their consequent human rights violation displayed by the capitalists against the Niger Delta people. Ojaide’s protagonist, The Activist and the women group known as Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR) among others, use their individual and collective platforms to resist injustice in the Niger Delta. Even though the effort made by The Activist to attract global attention to the situation of the people does not succeed, he establishes a newspaper through which he creates awareness on the predicament of the people of the Niger Delta. He uses the printing media as a veritable platform for sensitizing the oppressed on the implications of environmental pollution for the region and the need

to rise against it. On the other hand, the women of the Niger Delta employ a nude protest as an intervention-seeking strategy and its global impact is undeniably visible. Leaving the struggle in the hands of women in the text reveals the novelist's belief that the struggle against eco-pandemics in the Niger Delta would yield better results if the women become actively involved.

## Conclusion

This study examined how environmental exploitation and human rights violation as well as the revolutionary pressures they generate are depicted in *The Activist*. It identified political marginalization which is expressed through minority prejudice against the Niger Delta as one of the reasons why the region has not been given attention by the government and the multinationals as different parts of the world that were affected by COVID 19 pandemic were given. Among others factors responsible for the failure of the Niger Delta intervention-seeking strategies, economic hardship occasioned by pollution from oil exploitation is the most glaring. Eco-pandemics like unemployment, poverty, militancy, kidnapping, insecurity among others have compelled individuals to place the pursuit of personal survival above the collective goal. Thus, if the Niger Delta must be rid of eco-pandemics, the factors responsible for their spread, as conveyed by the Eco-Marxist posture of the novelist, require to be addressed with a sense of urgency just as the spread of COVID 19 pandemic was urgently checked.

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