INTERROGATING SEXUAL PREOCCUPATIONS IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE ACTIVIST*

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Abstract

Discourse on Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* tends to concentrate on his preoccupation with eco-activism, ignoring other meanings generated by the silences in the text. This essay investigates an aspect of this silence – sexuality – to show its role in the novel's plot and character development. Aspects of the psychoanalytical theory which give insight to the workings of sexuality are used to do a deconstructive reading of the text. Sexual interactions play a key role in *The Activist*. Plot and character development are, to a large extent, dependent on the characters' understanding of their own and/or reactions to the sexuality of the significant others in their lives. *The Activist* therefore is a novel of sexual connectedness.

Key words: sexuality, sex, gender, psychoanalysis, deconstruction.

1. Introduction

There is hardly any discussion that does not have implications for sexuality studies, especially in literature. Sexuality refers to feelings, behaviours, experiences and expressions of humans as sexual beings. It covers various sexually-related aspects of human life, including physical and psychological development, attitudes, thoughts and customs associated with the individual's sense of gender, relationships, sexual activities, mate selection, reproduction, and so on. In every sphere of human existence, the issue of sexuality comes up. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is viewed with much contradiction and confusion. Hence, Arowojolu (2009, p.8) states:

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> Human sexuality practices or behaviours are complex and are achieved in interpersonal and intra-personal acts. They involve a wide range of activities, such as strategies to attract a sexual partner, interaction between individuals, physical or emotional intimacy, and sexual contact... What is termed sex varies with individual and cultures. What many term sex may not be seen as so by others.... Similarly, attitudes vary with the location and with whom different sexual practices occur.

UNESCO (2009, p. 2) makes the following assumptions about sexuality and though they call them assumptions, they are basically true:

> • Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human life: it has physical, psychological, spiritual, social, economic, political and cultural dimensions.
> • Sexuality cannot be understood without reference to gender.
> • Diversity is a fundamental characteristic of sexuality.
> • The rules that govern sexual behaviour differ widely across and within cultures. Certain behaviours are seen as acceptable and desirable while others are considered unacceptable. This does not mean that these behaviours do not occur, or that they should be excluded from discussion within the context of sexuality education.

Of all the options available in sexuality for scholarship, literary critics appear to focus on discourses that border on gender and reproduction issues only. For a text like Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, critiques seem to concentrate on Ojaide's concern with ecological degradation. Uzoezie Nwagbara (2008) explores eco-activism and intellectual activism; Nonyelum Mba (2009) approaches the text from a feminist angle, political violence and resisting oppression, and Ojaide's use of the text to promote African indigenous thought and traditions via Udge songs are studied in Ifeyinwa Okolo's (2008 and 2010) essays. All these works take sides with the author's arguments, being that the Niger Delta is impoverished by the activities of the oil companies who are backed up by the federal government of Nigeria. Also, these works concur with the Marxist approach to changing the just order in the text, overlooking the networking of sexuality in the text and the way it has been deployed by Ojaide in telling the Niger Delta story as well as negotiating emancipation for the people. This essay investigates the networking of sexuality in *The Activist* in an attempt to show the role of sexuality and sexual nuances in the novel's plot development.

2. Theoretical Framework

Deconstruction and the psychoanalytical concepts of repression and sublimation are employed in the re-reading of *The Activist*. According to Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson (1993, p. 147), deconstruction begins when we "locate the moment when a text *transgresses the laws it appears to set up for itself*. At this point texts go to pieces, so to speak". In deconstructive reading, the domination of a set of ideas or significations over another or others is destroyed. This is done by "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text" (Babara Johnson, 1980, p. 5). In doing this, J.A. Cuddon (1991) says the plurality of signification in a text is discovered. In resisting the assertions in a text, a deconstructionist is acknowledging a writer's effort while at the same time trying to extend the coverage of a text to those areas intentionally and unintentionally excluded by its author. A writer has a specific message he wants to pass across and the materials he brings into his work are those that help in building up and conveying this message. Those that do not are dropped (he keeps silent on them) and this is what is referred to as selective elimination process. It follows, therefore, that every text has its gaps, silences, breaks, fissures, discontinuities or "omissions". A deconstructive reading, Peter Barry says, unearths and uses these symptomatic places to give "other" meanings to the text. Since these "discoveries" are outside of the author's line of focus, the meanings arrived at by the deconstructionist would be at variance with or seemingly contradictory to the "stable" one. However, these alternative meanings generated by a deconstructive reading do not supplant the original or "stable" one. Deconstruction is therefore an attempt to show that no author has claim of exactness over the meaning of his work. His attempts in writing are to give one side of view to selected experiences while those of the deconstructionist are giving other sides of view to the same experiences. To give other sides of meaning to *The Activist*, this essay uses the symptomatic places occasioned by the workings of sexuality in the text which are silenced in the author's efforts to promote environmental activism.

Psychoanalysis is an investigation of mental processes, the interaction between the conscious and unconscious mind as these manifest in an individual's observed behaviour. Psychoanalysis therefore is a "deconstruction" of self, an inquiry into the recesses of a person's being to discover an identity or identities "hidden" or not immediately accessible to that person. Of relevance to analysis in this work are the psychoanalytical ideas/concepts of repression and sublimation. Characters like the Activist and Pere who rise from grass to "grace" are measured against the tools of repression and sublimation. Barry (1995, p. 96-97) defines the first as "the 'forgetting' or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events, so that they are forced out of the unconscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious" and the second as a process "whereby the repressed material is

'promoted' into something grander or disguised as something 'noble'" . The sexual drive is considered to be the root of all other drives in the text.

3. Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*: A Summary

The Activist gets shot in the knee in a massacre of his village by soldiers and mobile police acting on the orders of the military government in conjunction with Bell Oil. The villagers had brought in foreign journalists to document the degree of their exploitation and pollution of their environment by the oil companies. The Activist is sent by the American ambassador as a refugee to America for surgery to extract the two bullets in his knee and continue with his education there. Aware of his poor background and the unrest at home, the Activist struggles and works hard lecturing in the day at Barber College and working as a taxi driver at night. Having established himself and got a PhD, he accepts the invitation from his people to come home and help in building up the Niger Delta State University. Ebi, a female lecturer at the Niger Delta State University who later becomes the Activist's wife, helps to reintegrate him into the society. The Activist makes friends with the area boys headed by Pere. Both The Activist and Pere see oil bunkering as a means of obtaining justice for the Niger Deltans in return for the devaluation of their environment and living conditions. Together they form the Delta Cartel, the bunkering business that financially empowers them to be relevant forces in the state. The Activist begins intensive sanitization of the state on winning elections as the governor of the state, quits the Delta Cartel and leaves everything to Pere.

4. Connecting the Sexual Dots in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

In charting the life of activism of the Activist in the United States of America, the role of sex/sexuality in the making of this character is not to be overlooked. He has been part of numerous protests and rallies and is even in the mailing list of numerous organisations who invite him to join in different kinds of protests, but, he does not have long-lasting relationships with friends acquired in the course of his life of activism. These friendships "especially with the opposite sex, ended as impulsively as they had started" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 16). His lack of concrete ties is based on one experience: "He tried to forget his white girlfriend with whom he had broken under disastrous circumstances…. Ever since he broke up with Amy, he had not had a serious interest in another woman because he saw her in every potential girlfriend; he did not want to play with fire" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 16-17). This gives an idea of a protagonist battling with psychological issues and devising the means of escape: hiding behind activism in order to forget the hurts sustained in a sexual relationship gone sour. In this light, the Activist shares a lot with Pere, another major character in the text whose propelling force is the sexual issues surrounding his paternity.

After Pere's mother's death, Omishola, whom he has always believed to be his father, tells him that he is not his father. The elders that would have usually met on this matter say nothing: "the elders did not want to humiliate him further with a meeting that would not help matters. Nor did they want to publicly air their suspicions that his mother might have slept with her ex-soldier husband even when he was already out of his mind" (Ojaide, 2006, p.77). So many intrigues are at work here. Pere's mother's ex-soldier husband, To Keep Nigeria One, was a boma boy who served in the military during the civil war and later had a mental illness that kept him parading the streets till he disappeared. Nobody bothered to search for him and after that, his young beautiful wife left his house. This wife became Omishola's lover. On her death, Omishola remembers that she

> …was known to be generous with her body for some time and that she was pregnant before they met. It would have certainly raised many eyebrows if people had known that he was sleeping with a woman who had already conceived for another man. While they never talked about it, Pere's mother knew that her lover knew that her pregnancy was from another man. But so strong was their attraction to each other at the beginning of the relationship that they were ready to break taboos in the name of love. Both lived with the secret (Ojaide, 2006, p.77).

Pere's society is that which restricts certain sexual relationships/behaviour. While it does not frown at sexual relationships between unmarried people, it is an offence between the married. Obaro Ikime (1969) records this about Urhoboland, where Pere comes from:

> Adultery was only committed when a man had sexual connexions with a married woman. If a married man had sexual connexions with an unmarried woman, this was no offence, unless the female concerned was under the age of puberty in which event the man was charged with rape… [For the married woman,] The compensation paid was heavier if the woman was pregnant at the time of the offence, or as a result of it. Any child born as a result of a man committing adultery with a married woman belonged to the man. The husband could, of course, get rid of the woman and claim all his expenses on her marriage from the adulterer (Ikime, 1969, p.275-276).

So, Pere's case is not just that he has a questionable paternity, his existence as far as his society is concerned is a confirmation of two taboos: sleeping with a woman

pregnant for another man and sleeping with a mad man. Following the customs, Omishola's relationship with Pere's mother is adulterous since To Keep Nigeria One only disappeared and there is no substantial evidence that he is dead. Omishola, therefore, has no paternal claim over Pere and rejecting Pere is not an offence to the society since Pere is not his biological son. It is also hard to ascertain who his father is, judging from Pere's mother's lifestyle. Abandoned to the mercy of the society, Pere has a hard time growing up. The psychological harm this rejection causes Pere shapes his future as an area boy. He, in a bitter reaction to Omishola's rejection and the elders' silence on the matter, takes on his maternal grandfather's name, leaves home to fend for himself first as a Pools agent and later as a motor park *agbero*. Having little education, he does not qualify for better jobs and so, gets to be the head of the motor park boys and, unknown to people close to him, the head of the area boys.

For further evidence to the non-acceptability of adultery, there are cases of Professor Don Odili's sexual harassment of his student (a younger lecturer's wife) and the scandal involving a young lecturer and an old chief's young wife in search of sexual satisfaction. In both cases, the culprits are publicly disgraced, a sign of their society's intolerance of their action. The contrast Ojaide provides which further corroborates Ikime's (1969) claims is seen in the Ebi – the Activist relationship. Ebi takes the Activist to Okwagbe to see her aunt, Torukpa, before the older woman would hear from gossips that she was living with a man. It is noticed that she does not frown at the relationship between Ebi and the Activist (verifying Ikime's (1969) claim that relations with unmarried women are not regarded as adulterous). When the Activist suggests marriage to Ebi, part of his reasons is "We have to marry not only for our sake but also for the sake of the unborn" (Ojaide, 2006, p.230). They have a traditional marriage ceremony and when Ebi becomes pregnant, they are overjoyed they had taken care of the baby by having a formal marriage ceremony. Theirs will not be a baby like Pere who has to face his society each day bearing the burden of his questionable paternity in mind.

It is obvious that sexuality is used to measure the harms done on the society by the oil companies, going by the complaints of the Women of Delta Forum (WODEFOR). The adverse effects of oil exploration are measured in terms of the (in)fertility of the women, loss of virility in men, body malfunctions during pregnancy for both mother and foetus, unattractiveness of men and women, early menstruation in girls and early menopause in women (Ojaide, 2006, p.219-223). Chief among the grievances held by WODEFOR against the oil companies is what they have classified as moral decadence evident in the sexual relations of married men and women:

> The Bell Oil field workers…were so charming that even married women easily fell for them. Yes, married women ran after the men from town to flirt and make love! These townspeople did not care about sleeping with other people's wives, unlike the rural men, who

> still held to strong moral values and considered such an act a taboo. Young wives, especially those who were yet to have children, went even further; they eloped with their oil-company lovers. The sexual deals that took place were unprecedented (Ojaide, 2006, p.222).

That the society does not restrict relationships between the unmarried does not mean it allows them to pass unnoticed. Sexual relationships, real or suspected, generate heated gossips, even in the academic environment. Ebi is aware of this but, to show her liberalism, ignores what her association with the Activist will make people say, at least, at the initial stage. Later on, she starts taking precautions, like waiting for dusk or twilight before going to visit the Activist, to avoid being scandalised. The only person she tries to protect from the gossip is her aunt, Torukpa. In using sexual gossips, sex is employed to make negative comments:

> The University Club was the gossip and rumour mill. There the sex lives of the community were exposed, analysed and debated. Alcohol often fuelled those in the club to imagine what they had not heard and to expose what they ought to keep mum about. They laughed hilariously as they talked about others or teased themselves about their sexual escapades. Ebi and the Activist did not go to the club (Ojaide, 2006, p. 113).

By excluding Ebi and the Activist from this crowd of sex gossips, Ojaide places them on a pedestal and makes the club goers the muck of the earth. Here, sex is used to assign class/status to characters in the text.

Amongst the questions asked the Activist on indicating his desire to return to Nigeria are:

> "With the rapacious women, can you find a partner there?"
> "With HIV and AIDS spreading like a harmattan blaze, will you practice abstinence?" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 25)

These questions occurring in the midst of the ones on the country's political and social instability give an insight on the fears associated with sex. To these questions, the Activist's disposition is: "Every woman in the country was not HIV positive or suffering from AIDS. Men, after all, also suffer from sexually transmitted diseases and he wondered why his dissuaders never thought about that fact" (Ojaide, 2006, p.26). One wonders why this negativism in the minds of the Activist's dissuaders is on women. It is perhaps to prove them wrong that Ojaide creates a female key character, Ebi, whom he ends up making to be flawless and too good to be true. After sex with Ebi and eating her homemade traditional dishes, the Activist finds the answers to the questions asked by his colleagues abroad:

> The Activist was at peace with himself the way he had never been before all his life... He did not want to think of his girlfriends in America who always resorted to ordering pizza or Kentucky fried chicken whenever he was visiting them... Let those who were speaking ill of Nigerian women abroad come home and see an unsurpassable lady in Ebi! (Ojaide, 2006, p.112)

Ojaide in making the Activist sing Ebi's praises because of her virginity promotes the traditional value placed on a woman's virginity. Inversely, that Ebi is happy with the Activist's performance, and of course, he has the advantage of experience, indicates that sexual voracity is traditionally encouraged in men and not in women.

The marriage introduction ceremony where Dr. Mukoro took the Activist serves to explore the Activist's colleagues' minds on his return from America. They believe he is bewitched to have left his lecturing job in America for the one in the Niger Delta State University. The tension created by the outburst of a drunk who spat on the Activist is diffused with the seductive dance "Catch your Gulder": "Men and women danced seductively; the women baited their male partners with their backsides" (Ojaide, 2006, p.30-31). Here, sex serves the role of a lubricant in the wheels of human relations. The group of friends who could not find a way of continuing with their conversation after the drunk's misbehaviour reconnect on the dance floor, and a nearly disastrous evening is salvaged.

For the Activist who finds it hard to make friends, especially with the opposite sex, it is surprising that he leaves Dr Mukoro who takes him out to parties and goes to Ebi, a female stranger he exchanges greetings with on the corridors, when he needs help with arranging for a warm welcome for his kinsmen from his village. Sexual magnetism can only be responsible for this, even though he denies it initially in the presence of his kinsmen. These men do not hide their leering glances while examining Ebi's exotic sexual potentials (Ojaide, 2006, p. 41-43). It is not amazing that the invitation to eat the food she placed before them is couched in a sexual metaphor: "Food on the table is like a woman who has removed her clothes; you don't have to look her in the eye for too long again before going into action" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 40). Using the reactions of these men, Ojaide foreshadows the end of the relationship between the Activist and Ebi.

In tracing the genealogy of the area boys, the role of sex in the formation, classification, and edification of the boma boys who later metamorphosed into area boys is important:

> The boma boys walked with the swagger of sailors who came to town to seek women in clubs. The long absence of sailors from land had starved them sexually and they came onshore to fulfil their libidinous cravings. They spent whatever it took to take

> to bed the club ladies that dressed fancifully. The oversexed sailors sometimes went to Okoye Street and sought outright prostitutes, who became their girlfriends until they went back to the sea.
>
> The young men flaunted their fancy clothing as a wand to overcome difficulties. They loved riding motorcycles and performed different stunts to impress girls. They liked girls in a romantic sense, and so impressed them with their manners rather than raping them as the police maligned them (Ojaide, 2006, p. 47)

Ojaide's efforts in this extract is to draw a contrast between what the police say the boma boys are – rapists – and what they really are – chivalrous men out to impress girls. Even if they extend this impression to having sex with the girls like the sailors they are likened to, it should be noted that these sailors are not violent and do not force themselves on their sex partners. Ojaide, in essence, is saying that the ability of the boma boys to negotiate non-violent sex and mate selection renders them harmless to the society.

The treatment of sexuality via ideas surrounding reproduction is noteworthy. The cases of Macaulay and Udoma call attention. When the victim for childlessness is not the woman, such a situation (childlessness) is attributed to the spirits. Macaulay, the hunter par excellence, does not have a child after six years of marriage. Although his relatives attribute the childless marriage to him, it is distanced from his person by connecting this inability to a spiritual source: "his relatives had advised him to stop hunting in order to assuage the spirits of the animals he had killed so that he could bring forth life" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 37). Nobody considers that it could be a biological defect in need of herbal remedies or medical attention. For Udoma, the blame is fixed squarely on the woman. At the suggestion that the problem of his childless marriage might be from him, he authoritatively declares: "It can't be me!" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 56) Jessica, his wife, without any medical confirmatory test, is considered to have "failed in her reproductive role" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 54). Udoma therefore needs "another woman to prove his virility and fertility" (Ojaide, 2006, p. 54). He sees in thirty-seven year old Ebi a potential wife material since all the younger girls are betrothed by the time they are seventeen or eighteen. The essence of marriage in the circles that Udoma moves in is procreation and love is equated to a man's desire for a woman to be the mother of his children. Udoma has no doubts about Ebi's fertility: "You will certainly give me a child. Your family's women are always fertile" (Ojaide, 2006, p.55). So, he does not understand why Ebi rejects his crude marriage offer but goes ahead to take him to a traditional healer/medicine man who helps him and Jessica to have a son.

The methods applied by the medicine man, Ezeani, when carefully examined, have some scientific potential. WHO (2009) and Janell L. Carroll (2005) place the majority of women within their ovulation period seven days after the menstrual flow. Ezeani's instructions for Jessica and Udoma to take his fertility boosting herbs/potions

within this ovulation period an hour before sexual intercourse recognise the likelihood of conception within this period. Ojaide strategically brings in the case of Udoma into the text to showcase Ebi's unparalleled virtues. She is running a doctoral programme while lecturing at the Niger Delta State University. She reasons differently from other women around her who are presented as being desperate to get married, even if it means staying in a loveless marriage. Ebi is prepared to wait for a man who will be her equal or just a little higher than her, a friend and husband. Criticisms from people, especially her mother, do not make her settle for less. When Udoma comes along, she is outstanding in seeking remedy for his childless marriage while rejecting his offer. Her main concern is how to ensure that Jessica does not get hurt by Udoma's insensitivity.

In the same vein, the Activist is represented as a gentleman by comparing him to other men's ideas of a pastime. When he asks Ebi out for a weekend, which is spent boating downstream, Ebi's thoughts present him as exceptional:

> How many single men around ever thought of rowing a boat from the creeks to the ocean? She asked herself. They were not interested in that sort of excitement. The only kind of fun that they wanted was drugging you with beer and then making love. They could not imagine more exciting ways of enjoyment or pleasing a woman, she thought (Ojaide, 2006, p.89).

In other words, Ojaide defines his protagonist based on his sexual behaviour, in particular, on the process of mate selection. This boating expedition, which affords the reader the opportunity to see a Niger Delta ravaged by the activities of the oil companies, foregrounds the growth in the relationship between the Activist and Ebi. In essence, what the writer takes to be the principal story in the text is developed by the foregrounding of sexuality.

Battles in the text are fought and won on sexual grounds. The intertribal war amongst the Itsekiri, Izon and Urhobo, find amelioration through sex. In the Red Cross refugee camps, the refugees forget their tribal differences and establish intertribal sexual relationships: "At night, the murmuring and moaning in the dark among men and women were neither in Itsekiri, Izon, or Urhobo. There was love in their distress. Some conceptions of more mixed children would come from the refugee camp experience" (Ojaide, 2006, p.217). Some young women and some sex workers perform the dual role of using sex to get back relief packages which had been extorted or stolen from the people by policemen and soldiers as well as putting these men in a pliable mood where they are not very rash or harsh in dealing with the people (Ojaide, 2006, p.215-216). In this manner, there is a redistribution of resources wrongfully acquired to the right quarters. Again, in the text, the Dennis and Erika sexual relationship is Bell Oil International's way of fighting/suppressing the voice of the

radicals in Niger Delta. Dennis is Chief Ishaka's son who is sent abroad to work as the African representative of the oil company in the Netherlands. This arrangement is contrived to silence Chief Ishaka who is vehemently anti-oil companies' activities. He does not waver in his antagonism, but his son gets carried away. In the Netherlands, Dennis discovers he does not have any duty assigned to him except to sign documents that have already been prepared in his name on which he has neither a say nor powers to alter. His days in the office are spent reading newspapers. Erika, a Dutch, is assigned to him as personal assistant and her only job is to make his tea. From all indications, Erika's primary assignment is to provide sexual distractions to the jobless Dennis and she does this excellently with a pregnancy resulting as proof. By the time Dennis comes home for his father's burial after some years abroad, he is so pro-Bell Oil that he could not wait to go back to the headquarters in the Netherlands.

Since sex has become the oil company's weapon for destabilizing the fight against them, Ojaide provides a sexual force to fight them back. It is therefore noteworthy that of all the struggles for environmental sanity in the text, only the one with a sexual base, the women's nude protest, delivers immediate effect. The Women of Delta Forum (WODEFOR) plan on a nude protest of the aged women which has a traditional implication of placing a curse on one's oppressor: "Women's nude protest is the worst curse possible in the traditional society. It's a curse invoked when all measures to seek redress or justice have failed. And those cursed always died within days" (Ojaide, 2006, p.246). Although the protest is aborted midway, being intercepted by the Federal Military Government (FMG) in collaboration with the oil companies, the idea in the novel is that it still proved effective as the deaths of the Bell Oil boss and the head of the FMG follow the protest in less than two weeks:

> The news of Mr. Van Hoort's heart attack and death a week later would not have had much significance on its own and might have been seen as natural if nothing else of national importance happened. After all, heart attacks happen to adults; more so to busy executives such as Mr. Van Hoort who had passed middle age. Exactly two weeks after the aborted nude protest, the death of the head of the FMG, General Mustapha Ali Dongo, in weird circumstances, meant the women's stripping protest that was thought aborted had worked. Is it not the religion of the oil lords, the people asked, that says that one can sin by action as well as by intent and thought? The women's thoughtfully planned action was fulfilled cosmically – they brought down tyrants that their men failed to remove. The two tyrants that tormented Niger Delta people were gone! (Ojaide, 2006, p.252-253)

A look at the reactions of characters in the text to the angry women says a lot about sex as a taboo topic. The gatemen at the oil stations either stayed at home or ran away on seeing the women to avoid beholding old women's shrivelled breasts. Even the head of the FMG who is superstitious understands the implication of the nude protest and deploys everything in his power to stop the protest from coming to a completion. If men had carried out the nude protest, the reactions from the characters in the text would not have been the same as for the women. In contriving a way to stop the protest, the head of the FGM appreciates the difference in nude men and women: "If they were men, he would have given orders that they be shot. But these were not just women but old women, who should be treated with respect. However, under no circumstances should they be allowed to embarrass the whole nation" (Ojaide, 2006, p.249). The same reactions are perceived in Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) which also has a scene of a nude protest by women with similar traditional implications as in *The Activist*. The Ruler in Ngugi's novel finds a lame explanation for the nude dance/protest for his foreign guests and quickly goes home to reshuffle his cabinet. It shows that the reactions and interpretations given to sexual actions are fluid and may depend on whether the person involved is fe/male as well as the age of the actor. D. Ottosson (2007), Janell L. Carroll (2005), and D.H. Barlow and V.M. Durand (2002) attest to these.

Gender specificity is significant in the *Udge* performance recorded in *The Activist*. The performance has both the male and female dominated/oriented segments. In the text, the male *Udge* singers appear to have all died or to be suffering from memory loss as a result of Christianity (Pentecostalism). This leaves women – their wives/widows – to sing the songs in the text. Here is seen the picture of the woman as a preserver of culture. In Ebi's summary, even when the content of the male songs is anti-female, women still bear the burden of preserving the memory:

> "As you can tell, they are men's songs. They emphasize women's frailties and overlook most of men's. That is why I am not keen on singing them. But I still sing them now because it is important to keep our memory correct, if only to remember our heritage", she explained (Ojaide, 2006, p. 153).

The text does not explore the rendition of the women's songs. The singers that come to entertain Ebi and the Activist are women – widows of deceased male singers. The man in their midst, Vhophen, whose father was a renowned singer, claims to have forgotten the songs as a result of his new found faith which sees the songs as meaningless. Yet, even when the women claim to "have women's songs; songs that only women sing" (Ojaide, 2006, p.154), they first perform those of the men and explain away women's songs with: "But we cannot sing to you those songs now" (Ojaide, 2006, p.154). Ojaide wants to make a statement that the women's songs are special and

require special preparation, but he does not succeed in doing this with only the sentence above as an excuse for non-performance, and there is a question on how well the women who have not done justice to their own area of specialisation can uphold another's. It appears the women here preserve the aspects of culture that promote men and cause the men, at all costs, to reclaim their lost memory while the same women make every effort to ensure the loss of the aspects of their culture that promote women. While this point does not show gender balance/equity, it gives Ojaide room to confer a high status on Ebi in her growing relationship with the Activist:

> As they drove home, the Activist acknowledged that women were carriers of the community's culture. In Ebi, he was beginning to piece together what he had forgotten about the culture as he was learning new things.
>
> "Why have you not forgotten these songs?" he asked her.
> "No, I can't forget them. They are part of me. I know songs of all my peoples, and I am proud of all of them," she said.
> What a talent, the Activist realized (Ojaide, 2006, p. 156).

5. Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing that relationships among the major characters and some minor ones are, to a large extent, dependent on their understanding of their own and/or reactions to the sexuality of the significant others in their lives. Even when the big story of *The Activist* centres on environmentalism, sexuality tells a different story that explains the events in the big story. Going by this reading, Ojaide's framework for effective elimination of oppression in the Niger Delta lies in sexuality. Sexuality is also deployed in defining characters and equipping them for the key roles they occupy in the unfolding events in the story. Read deconstructively, *The Activist* becomes a novel of sexual (inter)connectedness.

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