



**SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL  
IMPLICATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL  
DEGRADATION IN NIGER DELTA: A STUDY OF  
CHRISTIE WATSON'S *SUNBIRDS FAR AWAY***

**SHEHU GARBA SUNUSI**

*Department of General Studies, the Federal Polytechnic, Bauchi.*

**Abstract**

*The global outcry of ecological degradation by human beings has been an emerging thematic focus in the creative oeuvres of writers and eco-critics in the literary domain as regards the degraded Niger Delta region of Nigeria and its consequent activism amongst her people. No doubt the Niger Delta is a region that has suffered gross neglect and devastation by oil companies who have continued to degrade the environment through oil spills and pollution which has poisoned the ecosystem. This has serious implications on the socioeconomic and political life of the people of the Niger Delta. The implications include exploitation, poverty, violence and insecurity, instability and hosts of others. This study adopts ecocriticism as its theoretical framework. Based on the findings of this research, it is evident that the unguided oil exploration activities by multinational oil companies as well as self-induced actions among characters spell doom on the environment as both living and non-living things become negatively affected in all ramifications. It is worthy of note that the author, has succeeded in using the text under study as channel of creating global awareness towards promoting environmental conservation and various means of entrenching peace in the fictional devastated Niger Delta environment.*

**Keywords:** *Socio-economic, political, implication, environment, degradation*

**Introduction**

Since the discovery of oil in Nigeria, precisely in 1956, the oil states and their environs have suffered and continue to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation due to oil exploration. Suffice it to say that the Niger Deltans are predominantly farmers and fishermen. Thus, oil spillages across the land mass has serious adverse effect on the populace as the quality of water, vegetation and farm lands are rendered useless thereby affecting the livelihood and health of the local communities.

Nenibarini (cited by Mbachaga) reiterates this while writing on the impacts of oil pollution on livelihoods in Nigeria and posits that:

*The Niger Delta region of Nigeria experiences on the average 273 oil spills resulting to about 115,000 barrels of crude oil worth US\$5.64 million valid the current rate of US\$ 49 per barrel) spilled annually from 1976-2001, making the region most vulnerable to oil spill than anywhere else in the world. This spill and other environmental threats associated with oil production in the region, tremendously, impact on the fundamental rights of existence of local communities. This is, especially, so when we consider the fact that their normal sources of sustainable livelihood are continually being disrupted by these structures coupled with the lack of legislative backings required to protect them from these manmade environmental destructions and degradations with their associated social exclusions. (5)*

It is interesting to note that this region accounts for over 90 per cent of Nigeria's proven gas and oil reserves. Proven gas reserves were 4.502 trillion (cu m) in 2005 and proven oil reserves were 36 billion (cu m) in 2003. The Niger Delta fuels Nigeria's heavily oil-dependent economy and accounts for 95% of Nigeria's export earnings and over 80% of Federal Government's revenue. However, this region remains one of the poorest parts of the country. The extreme neglect of human rights and governance from all levels of government is endemic throughout the region. Those in power have favoured personal gain over community gain, causing a deeply entrenched resentment and mistrust of the political system (<http://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/context.html>). Economic emasculation of these people through environmental degradation and oil pollution has, in the last two decades or so, bred hostilities, militancy and violence in the region. This has manifested through milder civil disobedience to the more sinister and militant activism of youths who have organized themselves into guerrilla groups attacking oil installations, killing and maiming personnel of the various oil companies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research anchors on ecocriticism as its theoretical framework. Ecocriticism is a trending and promising literary field that has potentials for exploration of environmental praxis and conservative prominence owing to its interdisciplinary coverage. To this regard, ecocriticism like other literary

theories has been a product of developmental exigencies ranging from its time of conception till date. The trajectory in the flourishing of the theory opens diverse vistas concerning its origin and importance in the body of literary criticism. In exploring the development of Ecocriticism, David Carter submits that:

*In America, the concept of ecocriticism can be traced back at least, as far as an essay by William Ruekert in 1978, called "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". The concept lay dormant for some time until Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty reawakened interest in the project by publishing a survey of the field which she edited with Harold Fromm under the title The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology in 1996. (138-139)*

The above view shows that the advent of ecocriticism and its underlying development by the conscious efforts of its major proponents as an endearing literary theory till date. Based on Carter's view, it is evident that William Rueckert, Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty and Harold Fromm are foundational proponents of ecocriticism. However, the presence of the trio ecocritics and their scholarly contributions towards the advancement of the theory has remained reference points to other succeeding scholars and critics till date.

### **Methodology**

This research seeks to interpret the social, economic and political implications of environmental degradation on the people of the Niger Delta using ecocriticism from the perspective of the selected writer of the text. It is channeled towards addressing the ecological issues and how it affects the characters in the text. A textual analysis will be carried out that brings about socio-economic and political issues and how it affects the people of the oil rich region of the country. This is to be achieved by interpreting the novel within the conflict in the growth and development of the African society, dealing with environmental degradation as it affects the characters that victims of exploitation, oppression and injustice.

### **Plot Summary of the Text**

*Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* begins fully when their mother catches their father with another woman, twelve-year old Blessing and her fourteen-year old brother, Ezekiel, are forced to leave their comfortable home in Lagos for a village in the despoiled Niger Delta, to live with their mother's family. Without

running water or electricity, Warri is at first a nightmare for Blessing. Her mother is gone all day and works into night to pay the children's school fees. Her brother, once a promising student, seems to be falling increasingly under the influence of local group of violent teenage boys calling themselves Freedom Fighters. Her grandfather, a kind of misguided man is trying on Islam as his new religion of choice, and is even considering the possibility of bringing in a second wife to bear him male children.

But Blessing's grandmother, wise and practical, soon becomes a beloved mentor, teaching Blessing the ways of the midwife in rural Nigeria. Blessing is exposed to the horrors of genital mutilation and the devastation wrought on the environment by the British and American oil companies. As Warri comes to feel like home, Blessing becomes increasingly aware of the threats to its safety, both from its unshakable but dangerous traditions and the relentless carelessness of the modern world. Absorbing and passionate and set in the Niger Delta, *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* is the witty and beautifully written story of one family's strive to survive a new life they could never have imagined, struggling to find a deeper sense of identity along the way.

### **Discussion/Findings**

The Niger Delta experienced oil boom and due to continuous exploitation and exploration, the environment became degraded. Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* tells the story of a woman, and her children in Niger Delta, using Warri as the primary setting. Through the character of the little girl Blessing, the narrator tells the story of how women and other characters in the story in the degraded Warri are pushed to face ecological problems and the attendant consequences which would be discussed under the following headings:

### **Insecurity**

Obviously, the first exposure of ecological degradation and its grave impacts on places and characters in the novel is made manifest on the eve of the planned return of Blessing and Ezekiel alongside Mama after their father left them for another woman who he impregnated out of wedlock. The harsh condition that follows this divorce makes the trio to migrate from the luxurious city of Lagos to their maternal Grandparents' house in a small village near Warri. The idea of Mama in relocating the family to her parents' village in the Niger Delta region is stubbornly greeted by Ezekiel over what he sees as a 'suicide mission' considering his (pre) informed knowledge over the devastated condition of the region. However, it is through Ezekiel's show of fear and concern that the nature of many harmful activities going on in the region is clearly exposed in

the novel. The narrating voice accounts thus: “Even if you did make up, Ezekiel said, ‘Warri is not safe. And those villages are worse! Swamp villages! I googled Warri at the internet café. Oil bunkering, hostage taking, illness, guns, and poverty... (5)

It pertinent to note that the despoliation of the Niger Delta environment spurs insecurity and violence in the region from both the oil companies and host communities who are facing exploitation from the former. The exploited local people of the host community employ rascality in fighting against the oil operatives as retaliation over injustices being meted out on them and their environment by the Western Oil Company. The region is thrown into a chaotic condition which ushers in massive killings, kidnapping and other harmful activities. Even the white operatives are unsafe as the host community is thrown into a state of brutality. The vulnerable youth take laws into their hands as a means of activism or resistance against the Western Oil Company and their harmful activities in the Niger Delta environment. The narrator presents thus:

*What is that? I heard that before, but not so loudly.’*  
*‘Sirens,’ said Ezekiel. ‘Mama told me about them. It’s the white men on their way to work at the oil companies. They get taken to work in armoured vans with police escorts. Then the armoured vans take them back to their locked down compounds. Like prisoners... It is not safe if people need to go to work in armoured vans. (38)*

The above excerpt shows the high level of insecurity in the Niger Delta region of the novel. One begins to wonder what can lead to such security protocol in safeguarding the white men in carrying out their usual oil exploration activities. No doubt the environment becomes too hostile due to the effects of pollution of air, water, land and other living and non-living things in the environment. Since the affected people have lost their means of livelihood and survival, they engage in radical activism against the oil companies thereby making the region to be prone to violence and insecurity as the case may be. As can be interpreted by the above narrator’s account, the foreign oil operatives surround themselves with security agents to avoid the terror of the local people who are bent on frustrating them and their activities in the region.

Furthermore, the host communities while on the verge of registering their grievances over the activities of oil exploration, receives several reprisal attack from the Western Oil Company and the military government. The Western Oil Company sees such activism from the local people which are violent as a means of undermining their progress and profit making. It is worthy of note that such

protest by the local people is geared towards exposing the degradation of the environment and exploitation of the region. No doubt, any form of protest from them is seen as casting the oil companies into negative light in exposing their evils in the Niger Delta region. The Western Oil Company, in the same vein, retaliates through sponsoring killings of the protesting local people and arson in the oil producing communities. This ugly situation renders some persons hopeless and homeless as they lost their beloved ones and property. The novel captures this wicked action of the oil companies as the narrator points out:

*Boneboy had parents and a village in the creeks. But the mobile police, the Kill and Go, came for them. They had reports of some boys there, some useless boys, but it was not true. The police came and killed the whole village. Boneboy's parents are dead. Those bloody Kill and Go!'... 'Dead? The police killed them. 'But why?' there used to be lots of trouble in the creeks. (41)*

### **Health Hazards**

The adverse impact of pollution of the environment by the oil exploration activities is very colossal as regards the health status of the Niger Delta people. There is much record of death in the region owing to the pollution of the air through gas flaring. This is because the evaporating burning gas exposes the people to diseases that are life-threatening in nature. Grandma says “funerals are very big business these days. All this warring and disease. All these poisons from the oil companies” (82). It is the negligence of the oil companies in ensuring safety of the environment while carrying out their oil exploration activities that lead to the deterioration of the air and possible numerous deaths among members of the oil producing communities. This negligence of the companies is evident in the novel as Blessing expresses thus, “the smell of diesel was so thick that I could taste it. A pipeline fire lit up the sky; it was as if the sun had risen at midnight. Tiny bits of black ash settled on my hair, and made me cough” (86). The oil companies are not interested in the wellbeing of the Niger Delta environment and the people, rather they concentrate in making profits as the latter suffer with no reasonable solution in view.

### **Youth Restiveness and Militancy**

Significantly, *Tiny Sunbird, Far Away* clearly shows the impact of ecological degradation on the innocence of the vulnerable youths in the environment. They engage of all manner of unethical living owing to the degradation of their

environment which ignites aggression in their mode of existence. The narrator puts it:

*The boys in the boat carried the guns away from their bodies, in their bare, thin arms, as though they were afraid of them. I looked at the guns. My fingertips felt cold. I looked at the boys. Their eyes were red. Some of them were wearing nothing on their top half but string vests. They were laughing as they drank from bottles and smoked sticks; even the smell was even stronger than the stale smell of the river. (105)*

The above revelation shows the level of degradation of the psyche of the vulnerable youths in the oil producing communities who are faced with utmost exploitation of their environment. Furthermore, the level of impoverishment that greeted the region and her people due to unabated degradation and exploitation in the environment pushes group of boys form a violent group which according to Grandma kidnaps the oil operatives and demands heavy ransoms for their release. Although their actions are illicit but the actual interest is to offstage the white exploiters who have done more harm to their environment and sources of livelihood. In the light of the several degradation of the environment by the Western Oil Company, Watson exposes the high level of violence as a consequent result that bedevils the Niger Delta environment. The activism among the youth breeds violence and massive killings on the side of both the oil company and ‘Sibeye boys’ who are set to frustrating the progress of the former against exploitation and despoliation of their environment. The narrator captures that:

The shouting was so loud and the voices so deep it might have been police, or the Kill and Go police who were paid by the oil companies. The police that Grandma told me had killed Boneboy’s parents. They wore dark sunglasses, making it impossible to see their eyes...but the police, or army, or the government’s secret service men shouted at different words, and these voices were in unison...I stood up on my tiptoes to look over the compound wall and recognized the boys who were shooting at the sky outside Radio Clinic. The Sibeye Boys. The guns boys. I could see their berets. (117).

The Sibeye Boys in carrying out their violent activities in undermining the activities of the oil companies see the need to form a formidable force against their operations in ensuring a greener environment. This situation is captured in the radio commentary as the narrator puts it: “ The Sibeye Boys are looking for

now youth members. We are not a terrorist group. I repeat we are not a terrorist group. (150).

### **Unemployment and Underemployment**

No doubt, the Niger Delta region accounts over 90 per cent of the country's export earnings, yet the people remain largely unemployed and underemployed. Alhaji, Blessing and Ezekiel's grandfather is unemployed for all these years despite being a graduate of petroleum engineering. The oil companies mostly employ expatriates at the expense of the qualified members of the host oil producing communities. Those that are educated take to jobs far below their qualification. For instance, Celestine, Alhaji's second wife is a university graduate but could not secure any meaningful employment but takes up a job of a 'town mourner' because of the numerous death caused by the polluted environment. Like other locals, Mama is employed as a waitress. This validates Ahmed Yerima's assertion in an interview with Gbemisola Adeoti's that "oil is like kolanut, the people who grow it are different from people who eat it" (115). Ezekiel expresses his disgust and disappointment thus: "You people come here, Ezekiel slammed his fist down onto the table top, making us all jump, and take over our women, he looked at Mama, and our money. And our jobs. (270).

It is important to state that lack of meaningful employment to the teeming army of unemployed youth in the Niger Delta is largely responsible for the high level of violence and insecurity.

### **Economic Sabotage**

The anger and frustration of the youth in the Niger Delta are being expressed through pipeline vandalism. This has adverse effect on the people and the environment. Ezekiel represents the people of the Niger Delta, Watson uses to highlight how the Western Oil Company through the help of the government exploit the poor masses, their lands, their jobs and their women. This leads him to join the "Sibeye Boys" to sabotage the oil pipeline which leads to an explosion that caused his death and several others in turn leaving Mama and Blessing in a traumatic state. The pipeline vandalism not only accounts for the loss of revenue for the government and the oil companies but it further aggravates the despoliation of the environment. In addition it causes the death of many innocent members of the oil producing communities.

### **Poverty**

There is no gainsaying the fact that the people in the Niger Delta are extremely poor due to the condition they find themselves. The exploration and exploitation



of oil destroys the major means of their livelihood. The people are mostly farmers and fishermen; the destruction of the environment makes it difficult for the people to eke out a living. Mama does not have enough money to send both Blessing and her brother to school. The little she earns as a waitress is not sufficient for both of them. As a result, Blessing has to drop out of school to become Grandma's apprentice as midwife. Ezekiel has to stop going to school in spite of his burning ambition and desire to become a medical doctor. In the end he has to drop out of school to join the "Sibeye Boys" becoming a militant instead. The text clearly pointed out the plight of the people in the polluted Warri environment and how only the rich survives even sell to the poor as Grandma describes the owner of the borehole water where they all buy water. The despoliation of the environment makes life extremely difficult and unbearable to the people of the oil rich region of Nigeria. Many people cannot afford to send their children to school due to pervasive poverty in the land.

#### **Absence of Basic Infrastructure**

There is an obvious collaboration between the government and the oil companies in denying the people of the Niger Delta basic infrastructure such as portable water, schools, hospitals and roads. There is no gainsaying the fact that due to high level of pollution by the activities of Western Oil Company which affects the water in the region. It is evident that oil spillage on water goes a long way in affecting its maximum utilization and beneficiaries therein. The aquatic beings suffer mightily as they are being decimated as a result of contamination of their abode with poisonous chemicals. In the same vein, humans also get affected as they face difficulties in using polluted water carrying out the essential needs such as cooking and drinking. The pollution of the river by oil spillage and the challenges it breeds among local people is well captured in the novel. Blessing expresses that:

*As Grandma led me away from the sink of the toilet a new smell reached my nose...I followed her, all the time wondering what the smell was. Then I heard water. The water of the Delta is the blood of Nigeria'. Grandma led through twisted red trees and scratchy bushes until we came to the riverbank and I felt the ground underneath my slippers soften and cool, as though I suddenly had my own slippers back. 'But we must not drink this. Only in emergencies. The tap water is cleaner. But now, this water is full of oil, and salt, not only for washing clothes and bodies. Not for drinking.' ... The water was dark, dark, dark. It looked like thick mud. (20-21)*

This exposure by Blessing shows a total pollution of the river in the Niger Delta region based on the effect of oil spillage. Thus, the continuous and unhealthy activities of Western Oil Company which leads to pollution of river also brings about dangerous pattern of existence among the people in the region including fishes and other aquatic organisms which are being decimated. In keep suffering as their means of survival as fishermen is adversely affected by the unguided oil exploration activities of the oil companies.

### **Conclusion**

In Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* there are many instances and portrayal of utter devastation and exploitation of the Niger Delta environment by the activities of the oil companies being represented by the Western Oil Company and the military government. The consequences of such activities bring about instability, violence and insecurity, absence of basic infrastructure such as water, school and primary health care facilities. The fall out of all these result in poverty, death and strange diseases which affect the generality of the people of the Niger Delta.

### **Works cited**

- Carter, David. (2006) *Literary Theory*. Pocket Essentials.
- Elizabeth, I. C., Noor, R., and Talif, R., (2020). An Ecofeminist Reading of Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 10 (9), 213-224.
- Ikenna, Micheal Ughochi. Ecological Degradation and Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*. An unpublished M. A Thesis. Department of English, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2019.
- Mbachaga, Dasen, J. (2018) Oil Exploration and Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta: An Ecocritical Reading of Arnold Udoka's *Inyene*. *Studies on Ecocriticism*. Eds. Emasealu, Emmanuel and Mbachaga, Jonatha. Makurdi: BookWorks Publishers.
- Watson, Christie. (2011) *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*. Querqus Books Ltd.
- Yerima, A. (1989). "The Guerilla Theatre as a Tool for National Awakening: A Study of the Soyinka Experience". *Literature and National Consciousness*. Ed. Ernest Emenyonu. Ibadan: Heinemann, 180-189.