

ECOCRITICAL READING OF CHRISTIE WATSON'S *TINY SUNBIRDS FAR AWAY: A CORRECTIVE ROUTE*

Prof. Ifeyinwa Ogbazi

Department of English and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: ji.ogbazi@unizik.edu.ng

&

Chiamaka Thelma Oparah

Department of English and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: chiamakaoparah444@gmail.com

Abstract

The Niger Delta environment has been saddled over the years with ecological degradation, pollution, environmental menace as a result of oil exploration and exploitation that is harmful to man, plants, and animals. This has attracted the attention of writers who through literature are committed to the wellbeing of the people and the environment. This paper examines and creates a conscious awareness towards the plight of the Niger Delta environment, depicted through the experiences of the characters in Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* as the text of reference; with an attempt to remedy the pitiful condition of the region through suggestions by the writer of the above written text if duly applied. There is a future representation of the Niger Delta region by the writer that reflects hope if there is a resolve for change and all measures implemented. The line of the argument in this study is that the environment is not only affected but man in his entirety; his dreams and purpose dance to the music. This paper investigates the effects of environmental degradation caused by oil exploration on innocent citizens of the region and on the environment. This study is predicated on Ecocriticism theory because of its stance in investigating the relationship between man and his environment. Finally, this study focuses on the recreation and rehabilitation of the Niger Delta region.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Ecocriticism, Ecological Degradation, Recreation, corrective

Introduction:

The "Environment" is defined by Ayo Fatubarin, (2009: 44) as "the surrounding of an organism in the place where it lives". The Environment has always played a significant role in the life of man; such that one cannot do without the other. There is a mutual relationship between man and his ecological habitat. If the environment is unfriendly and inhabitable, then certainly man's comfort, growth and his general being will forever remain unstable. Ojaide (2012: 66) highlights further;

The study of the environment inevitably leads to issues of land, culture, agriculture, politics, and economy, among others. These issues are related to ownership of land, oppression, and exploitation. These issues and the environment call for an "ecology of justice" or human rights that will bring harmony to the relationship between humans and their environment for their respective wellbeing in the interconnected circles of life."

Here, he expounds further the issues synonymous with man's ecological makeup (environment) in different aspects that cannot be overlooked. These issues according to him should be addressed and paid heed to for a total welfare of man cum his existence. "Ecology of Justice" is a call to put an abrupt end to the injustices meted on the environment. The gas flaring, blowouts, oil spills and other forms of ecological despoliations are typical issues faced by the Niger Delta. According to Psalms (2011:28): "The region is presented as a paradox of abject poverty in the midst of vulgar opulence". In other words, the region blessed with natural resources and most importantly with oil still wallows in abject poverty and underdevelopment. Oil makes the Niger Delta a site of oil extraction, production, and super profits for a host of transnational, national and local actors; it has also become a vortex of struggles over access to, control over, and distribution of oil wealth. Obi (2012) argues that "because of oil, and the greed

that it has bred- globally as well as locally-violence, its production as a means of livelihood has mingled with the multiple inequalities and inequities and contradictions that mark daily existence, in the villages, creeks, cities of the region”. Igba Luga(2010: 203) supporting the interpretation of the opinions of Hieberts suggests that nature is the “totality of the process and beings in the world, the entire earth and its ecological systems in which the human is a natural member”. Lending credence to the above statement, he avers that “man is an integral part of nature who affects and is affected by ecological changes. According to Darah (2011:3) “the Niger Delta refers to that region of Africa that borders the Atlantic seaboard and stretches from Cross River state near Cameroon in the east to the Western boundary of Delta and Edo state near Ilaje country”. Giving an extensive description of the region, he states that the region formerly made up of six of Nigeria’s 36 states, namely, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers has been enlarged to include all nine oil-producing states. With an inclusion of Imo, Ondo and Abia. The region has gone through harsh times with an undertone of perilous ordeals, environmental despoliation and exploration and without mincing words only realistic solutions and effective implementation on the part of the government will remedy the situation; thereby playing the “salvific character” the region has always longed for. With the assistance and contributions of writers who create awareness and re-awakens the support of the government, International bodies, and well-meaning citizens of the country, this can become a reality. Ifejirika Echezona (2014:53) concurs that;

Novelists, Playwrights and poets are expected to use their work to create awareness to man of the devastation and defacement of the environment through bush burning, soil excavation, indiscriminate killing of wild life, thereby making some species to go extinct, illegal burying of ancestral lakes, rivers and streams with sand for the sole purpose of artificial development, dumping toxic wastes in rivers, seas and oceans, using of chemicals in fishing activities, pollution of all kinds and indiscriminate construction of roads and building on lands that were traditionally reserved as green vegetation.

With their contributions (writers), attention will be given to areas of concern and environmental justice attained. It should be known that the preservation of the physical environment is the sole responsibility of man. The environment should be eco-friendly and healthy for a mutual co-existence.

Ecocriticism as Theoretical Parlance

Ecocriticism, a term first used by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in reference to “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.” identifies itself with the concerns of the environment with all the physical makeup and with a resolute stand for a better environment. Cheryl Glotfelty (1996:7) defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”.

Simon Estok’s definition of Ecocriticism in “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism” (2005:16-17) gives a broader meaning when defining the theory. He asserts;

Any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function- thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical or otherwise of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (Literary or other) that contribute to material worlds.

This brings to light the sole aim of the theory which is committed to positive change and environmental enhancement in whatever form mirrored through the lens of literature. Ogaga (2013:5) comments on the theory, saying that Ecocriticism should be preoccupied with (recreating and strategizing). That is, invention of new techniques that will be geared towards the reformation of the environment, bringing to an end the many crises faced by man in his environment.

The most fundamental feature of ecocriticism is basically to theorize the unending environmental crisis mankind continues to create and invoke different strategies (which are usually interdisciplinary) as means of bridging the frightening gap between humans and the environment. Hence Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells remark that the dominant

tradition of eco-criticism is to “evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to their environmental crises.

Asika (2015:392) defines Ecocriticism as a “branch of literary discourse concerned with the investigation of the relationship between man and nature, the eco-system and the eco-sphere”. Asika’s definition of ecocriticism gives a general concurrence to the other definitions incorporating the eco- system and the eco-sphere.

From the above therefore; there is an agreement that ecocriticism is concerned in the relationship between man and nature. This theory is suitable because the study focuses on the total abolition of man’s harmful activities in the environment; that causes ecological degradation and poses threats to nature. This study has its tenets in this theory, countering the environmental violence and rape; then seek towards the recovery and preservation of nature.

Ecological Degradation in Christie Watson’s *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*

Set in the Niger Delta, Christie Watson’s *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* narrates the political and environmental crisis taking place in the Niger Delta. She paints a real picture of the happenings, events of the Sibeye boys and clash with the white oil expatriates, an environment suffering the effects of oil spills and wallowing in lack of basic for their healthy living. The novel to a large extent gives a vivid description to the many events, exploitative activities, chaos and crisis faced by the region and inhabitants. Watson like many other artist has written while condemning the many acts of exploitation and degradation using literature as a medium. Twelve-year-old Blessing and Ezekiel are made to bear the trauma that follows the separation of her parents which leads to their relocating to Warri, a town in Delta. Their father, an accountant worked in central Lagos and their mother worked in Royal Imperial Hotel. When discussing their movement and her decision to relocate to Warri., Ezekiel, her brother, who has asthma and is considered a sickly child is perturbed of his health. Having googled about Warri, he expresses so much concern about the state of the town and his general wellbeing considering his health status. He expresses thus:

Even if you did make up, Ezekiel said, “Warri is not safe, and those villages are even worse! Swamp villages! I googled Warri at the Internet Café. Oil bunkering, hostage taking, illness, guns and poverty. What about my asthma? They burn poisonous chemicals straight into the air. It’s not a safe place to live. (TSFA,2011:8)

The panic in Ezekiel’s voice states the obvious. Because of the rate of oil exploitation and exploration in the region, the increase in crime cannot be undermined or overemphasized. There is high rate of killings, hunger and poverty. They people of the region live with the threat of violence, rape, and death. Of course, if there was another place to relocate to, Mama would have concurred with Ezekiel option of not travelling to Warri. Watson (2011: 287) states that;

The pipeline fires and flames had a negative impact on the health status of the people living in the region. They live with the effects of the environmental devastation caused by the continued gas flaring and frequent ecological accidents, which have amounted to over one and a half million tons of spilled oil: starvation, asthma, chest infections, and death.

On their way, they witness one of the very many environmental injustices perpetuated by the oil companies and the military government. Blessing narrates thus;

As we neared Warri, the sky became even brighter. I saw a flame in the distance. A giant torch which made the sky angry. “Pipeline fires, said Zafi. “They are burning the gases from the oil”. He started coughing again... Warri even smelled different from Lagos. I closed my eyes and sniffed. The air smelled like book unopened for a very long time. (TSFA, 2011:12)

The above narration states an unhealthy and polluted environment that is totally unsafe for all living things. These companies burn gases without applying safety measures for protecting human lives and the environment. Unarguably, there are grave implications of burning gases. The gas flaring affects the

atmosphere and pollutes the air which leads to most air borne diseases and illnesses. According to Psalms (2011: 30), “the flaring of gas has the tendency of unleashing such diseases as cancers, asthma, bronchitis, blood disorders, etc. Subsequently, against the region’s ecosystem, the people are forced to share their neighborhood with such unfriendly phenomena as acid rain, global heat, deforestation wildfires, contaminated toxic waters” etc. Grandma’s comment towards the water, confirms the obvious. Oil spillage on water condemns the streams and rivers making it unsafe for drinking. It is indeed oil on water. While she shows Blessing round, she didn’t forget to stress that the water is not pure for drinking. Rather the tap water was preferable.

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 me 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, so only for washing clothes and bodies. Not for drinking.’... The water was dark, dark, dark. It looked like thick mud. Swirly patterns coloured the top. I could not see the reflection of the strange twisted trees. I peered in, half closing my eyes, but there were no reflections. Not mine. Not even Grandma’s ...the river smelled like Warri, of old books that have been left in the rains (TSFA,2011:20-21)

Another pitiable environmental mayhem Blessing experienced and wouldn’t forget in a hurry is her journey with Grandma to deliver Emete of her baby on an occasion. According to her, the water was smelly and unsafe. Indeed, one of the contributions of the Western oil companies to the region. Is oil a curse? Blessing narrates thus;

As we travelled across the water, the smell of oil from the river made me cover my mouth and nose with my scarf. Emete’s husband stabbed his rod into the riverbed, pushing the boat forward in big jumps as the river became thicker near the swampy village and spread out like the lines at the centre of a leaf. A large toad was at the riverbank puffing its cheeks out, singing a low song. The water was swirling with mudskippers. (TSFA,2011:112)

The above excerpt shows the effect and damage of oil spillage in the environment, on water and on the general wellbeing of man. Boneboy’s hobbies comes to a halt and is better imagined because of the water. Blessing narrates; “Ezekiel said that Boneboy was the best swimmer in Nigeria, and it was easy to believe. Ezekiel said that Boneboy had to swim through the air only, as he could no longer swim in the river because of the oil spills” (50)

The people get dispossessed of their natural resources “oil” and their environment that gets messed up with oil rendering their plants and streams useless. The oil companies are self –centered and only concerned with the profit they make and not the wellbeing of the people.

“The oil companies are taking billions of dollars from our land. They know it’s not theirs to take. We all listened carefully to Grandma speaking normal words. “So they let us busy ourselves killing each other. And they let us think we have a way of taking back what is ours by kidnapping those oyibos.’ ... (TSFA: 2011:236)

Families are displaced and children rendered homeless as was the case of Boneboy whose parents were killed by The Kill and Go mobile police leaving him without parents and care. All thanks to Alhaji and Grandma who became the new family he had. Lives and properties were lost as the Sibeye boys fights against the marginalization and suppression faced by their people who, though being the owners of the oil, suffered like the tenants. Dreams and life goals weren’t actualized as the hostile environment devoid of peace and growth didn’t make it possible. In most cases, finance is the problem , as is the case of Ezekiel who nurses his interest to be a Doctor but becomes a Sibeye boy who dies in the process of breaking a pipeline. It was a revenge. Grandma in a discussion with Alhaji explained in few words. “It was Ezekiel,’ said Grandma, eventually. ‘joining that gang of Sibeye Boys. Over twenty Boys in hospital now. Breaking a pipeline. An explosion like that. Imagine.” (246) Ezekiel, an intelligent boy

ends up joining this gang, after he had a resit which was as a result of his absence in school and health issues he had. He gets admitted in the hospital and so miss a lot in School. He has a passion for medicine and science, and so yearns to be a medical Doctor, But, this became a fallacy as he gets interested to fight these exploiters and greed infested oil workers. Supporting their ideology, he joins the gang in order to reclaim the region from the hands of the exploiters. The Government and the Western Oil Companies. Ekebor (2011:184), sheds more light on Ezekiel's conscious efforts for justice. She opines that, "in every society, there exists sensitive individuals who are conscious of the way things are and the way they ought to be; there is always a desire to do something (whether positive or negative to change the situation for the better. Ezekiel's sense of innocence is affected likewise his environment. He feels exploited and so couldn't stand his mother exploited too. No wonder his reaction towards Dan. To Dan he said, He said, 'You people come here...and take our women,' he looked at Mama, 'and our money. And our jobs'. He looked at Alhaji. Nobody moved. 'You pay people to kill us, and you rape our land, then our women! And you give me a chocolate bar? (178). He views his mother as against the struggle to total freedom and total emancipation of the region. Just as the way the environment is raped, so does the women. In order to survive, women and especially young girls engage in prostitution and work in bars, in order to hook up with the whitemen. To them, their comfort and money can never be toiled with. Christie Obbo (1980:88) in her "*African Women, Their Struggle for Economic Independence*", categorizes the nature of single women and says that, sex is the natural skill that is available to them. It is a temporary measure to tide over bad situations like unemployment and bad times. Mama started working in the Highlife Bar, and definitely her moves and actions shows that she enjoyed working there. She gets tips that helped in sustaining her family and having Dan, is one opportunity she sees as divine.

Aquatic animals die because the water is unsafe to drink. What about the fishermen who depend solely on fishing? The consequence of the pollutions of the waters can only be starvation, diseases, poverty, and then increase in crime. Because their main source of livelihood, which is fishing has been destroyed by oil exploration, they indulge in crimes like kidnapping, stealing, killings and violence. Supporting this claim, Onyema Chris (2011: 189) in "*Jungle and Oil Green: Currents of Environmental Discourse in Four Upland Niger Delta Narratives.*" avers that, " the people of the Niger Delta, who are mainly fishermen and farmers, have been suffering from acts of bioterrorism, oil pollution of lands and waters, gas flaring, hunger ,diseases and poverty, as a result of the general destruction of their aquatic and terrestrial reserves. The youths in a bid to protest against the environmental injustices and resist the exploitative activities of the Western oil companies meted out in the region formed different groups and became deadly. They indulge in various vulnerable activities like stealing, oil bunkering, kidnapping the oil workers, who they feel are the cause of their problems. These actions lead to a chaotic environment, leaving innocent individuals dead in most cases. It is disheartening that some chiefs because of their own selfish interest take bribe from these oil companies and so not care any longer for the welfare of their people. They sell their conscience as far as it is well with them and their families. Ezekiel's comment highlights this;

Don't worry about us he said. They looked up suddenly as if they had noticed him for the first line. "Give us respiratory diseases, cancers, make our children deformed! Some of the stories I hear from my own sister who is an assistant birth attendant, prove that the air is poisoning our women (TSFA, 2011: 123)

The environment is polluted and trees are lost leading to climatic change, desertification, erosion, fewer crops, flooding and a host of other problems. In most cases, the inhabitants of the of the Niger Delta are giving demeaning job positions and the ones termed honorable jobs are reserved only for the white oil expatriates. Alhaji experience gives a vivid picture of the above statement. Alhaji rebukes their unjust practice on the people of the Niger Delta region. He says;

Ghost worker! Alhaji! What do they think, that they can put me on a desk and give me bloody biscuits! Say you are free to play the computer games, surf the internet, like am a boy. ... 'It's disgusting' said

Mama. ‘This country. Treating local men as children, patronizing them with imaginary jobs. What an insult. (TSFA, 2011: 211)

Watson’s *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* gives a vivid reflection of most of the problems dominant in the Niger Delta Region and is being encountered by the citizens of the region. Because there is a symbiotic relationship between the former and the latter, that one cannot live or function independently.

The character of Ezekiel and Grandma opposes the ills in their environment and agitates for change. According to J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada, “Liberation is ...a deliberate attempt made to open people’s eyes to both what is wrong themselves and what is wrong with their society”. The people, aware of their condition take the route of liberation and correction. That is, changing the trend which isn’t favorable to them. Ezekiel engages in a protest with the Sibeye boys against the Multinational Companies that exploited their lands. He contacts the Sibeye boys to Kidnap Dan whom he considers an enemy to his growth and that of his people. But unfortunately, in the cause of breaking a pipeline, he gets burnt and dies. The Nude protest by Grandma and the women is the women’s contribution for change in the Niger Delta region. To Grandma,” there is nothing more powerful than a naked woman” (263) In the protest, the women condemn the exploitative acts on their environment by the oil companies and then state their request. The narrator writes:

...We want better healthcare. We want the world to know what is happening in our country. We are living with nothing. Nothing. War, fighting. Those people using our oil to make their cars drive fast, do they know we are dying? We are being murdered and our sons are turning into murderers! No chance of future for our sons. (TSFA,2011:265)

These highlights from Christie Watson’s *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway* are few citations out of the many instances written in the novel.

Prior to the belief that the Niger Delta issues have been put into consideration and these problems attended to, it will be totally wrong to say that they are no longer in existence. The mismanagement of funds and ineffectiveness on the part of leaders has made solution to be farfetched and conditions worsened. Therefore, some of the suggestions from the writer of the text used in this study will hopefully be of immense benefit to the alleviations of their sufferings.

Christie Watson, in her novel’s “Afterword” encourages resilience and a peaceful partnering. That is, real freedom fighters working peacefully to ensure basic human rights for all people of the Delta and becoming a force that the oil companies and government can no longer ignore. She beckons on different ethnic and religious groups to converge; as their voices hauled out in unity is louder and stronger than the guns of the militants. That, they existed before oil companies, government and militia groups. And surely, they will remain. (TSFA, 2011: 287)

Some corrective measures will also be extracted from the popular Niger Delta Novel, “*The Activist*” written by an award winning Nigerian Academic Tanure Ojaide. He proffers solutions represented in the character of the Activist, that can help ameliorate the suffering of the people of the region. The Activist, in his emergence as the governor; ensures a cleanup from these oil companies who have succeeded in abusing the environment putting the region in a total state of pollution and degradation.

Empowering and employing qualified youths who will hold strategic positions in these oil companies will help in achieving the goal of reformation and recreation as they will no longer be given derogatory positions to occupy. There will be a platform for job creation and other positions with an intention to keep them meaningfully busy. The Activist hopes to establish indigenous oil companies to compete with the foreign companies in oil drilling. It is in plan to create a ministry of Environment and Mineral matters to help in keeping the region clean and ensure environmental laws are kept and transgressors checked.

These corrective measures, when effectively utilized will improve the relative “Peace” in the region while giving a near perfect Niger Delta.; reformed and restructured.

Conclusion

No doubt, there is need for an eco-friendly environment. The environment plays an integral role in the life of man as it provides the material support base for man. Therefore, mankind must make a conscious effort to maintain, preserve and improve his ecological habitat to the best of his ability. For a degeneration of his environment is a total degeneration of a meaningful life in its entirety. The writer being aware of these issues, mirrors the environmental devastation in the Niger Delta region through her novel and gives solutions that can abate these issues if effectively implemented. Employing the descriptive style, and writing from the first person point of view, she assumes the character of Blessing who narrates the events in the novel. There is a call to the people of the Niger Delta to rise above the ashes of their challenges, and soar above the present condition they have found themselves in.

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