

Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*: The Dynamics of Environmental Exploitation and Ecocriticism

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Environmental degradation and pollution has been a dominant motif in Niger-Delta narratives. This is apparently due to the myriad of problems facing the region as a result of the activities of oil companies exploring the crude oil in the region. Research works on the narratives from the region have however not adequately addressed the relationship between fate and environment. This study therefore examines fate and environment in Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* with a view to bringing out the nexus of fate and environment and how the characters have responded to the challenges of their environment.

Methodology: This research uses Eco-criticism as the theoretical framework. Eco-criticism deals with the trends of nature in literary works. The concern of eco-critics is the place of literature in the face of climatic change and environmental problems. Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* is purposively selected because it explores the environment of the Niger-Delta towards bringing out ecological problems facing the people and the environment. The text is subjected to critical analysis.

Findings: The findings showed that the expatriates and the government reap the profits, while the people whose daily life is characterised by poverty are left disillusioned. Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* drives home the view of a first-hand experience of the Niger-Delta situation by bringing the protagonist home from Lagos and further analyses the Niger-Delta situation by revealing the effect of oil exploration as leading to unrest and militancy in the region. The expatriates exploring crude oil in the region are immune to the environmental hardship the people suffer as they live in affluence and serene environment devoid of pollution all within the same region. All these combine to make the region very restive.

Conclusion: The study concluded that without prejudice to the concept of fatalism which has characterised the narratives from the Niger-Delta region, the narrative reveals that the survival and existence of the people is a product of their continuous interaction with their environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Degradation, Christie Watson, Nigeria.

Article History

Received:
April 02, 2023

Revised:
June 17, 2023

Accepted:
June 22, 2023

Published:
June 30, 2023

Introduction

Background to the Study

Over the years, man has continued to benefit from the benevolence of nature and environment. Some people who are of the opinion that their environment does not support their well-being could relocate. Those who could not, resign to fate and usually resolve to make the best use of what the environment throws at them. If an environment is conducive for human existence in all aspects it is as a result of human interaction with the environment. If the reverse is the case, man is equally responsible. In view of the importance of the ecosystem to human existence, it is not out of place for man to live in harmony with his environment. This much desired harmony is what is missing in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

People from within and outside the region have responded to the crises in the region in their own ways. Their activities have helped to put the problems in better perspective and brought increased attention to the issues of the region. One of such is the response of the literary world to this problem. A lot of writers from within and outside this environment have captured the realities of the Niger-Delta region in their literary composition. This study concerns itself with one of such writers - Christie Watson - as it explores the nexus of fate and environment in the narrative. Even in the face of all these responses, the fact still remains that the Niger-Delta region is the place the people can call their own.

The environment has witnessed gradual destruction of the Edenic harmony that existed between man and nature. The attendant problems of environmental neglect are bringing untold hardship to the world. The depletion of the ozone layer has exposed the world to the ultra-violet rays of the sun. Global warming and desert encroachment are part of the problems. As a result of human activities, many wildlife species have gone into extinction while forests undergo destruction and rivers keep drying up. Maintaining the balance of the ecosystem has posed problem for mankind.

The worst hit in Nigeria is the Niger-Delta region. K.A. Ayuba (2012) points out that the Niger-Delta is among the ten most important wetland marine ecosystems in the world. It consists of diverse ecosystems of mangrove swamps, fresh water swamps, and rain forest and is the largest wetland in Africa. Due to oil pollution, the area is now characterised by contaminated streams and rivers, forest destruction and biodiversity loss in general. The area is an ecological wasteland. This affects the livelihood of the indigenous people who depend on the ecosystem services for survival and this has led to an increase in the level of poverty and displacement of the Niger-Delta people. It has also brought untold hardship to the people of the region.

The increased awareness of the danger portend by the continuous neglect of the Delta-region has crept into the literary world. Writers have continued to engage the need for environmental regeneration and justice in their publications across the genres of literature. Such works include Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006); Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (1999); Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006); Ninmmo Bassey's *We Thought it was oil but it was Blood* (2002); Helon Habilah's *Oil on Water* (2010); Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2011); Chimeka Garrick's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010) among others. The major thrust of these works is to bring to the fore the environmental problems of the Niger-Delta since the exploration of oil began in the region.

Christie Watson who has written about the plight of the Niger-Delta could be said to have been influenced by the love of nature which characterises the Romantic era in British literature. Romanticism is a revolt against the age of enlightenment which values logic, reason and rationality. Romanticism was in vogue from mid-17th century till the end of the 18th century. It accorded priority to emotion, passion nature and individuality. The pastoral natural rural life and environmental harmony distinguished the writings of this age. The domineering British writers of this period include William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. Worthy of note are Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Wordsworth's "The World is too Much with us" Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

These literary works among others help to define the Romantic era. The need to regenerate the environment/nature as shown by the romantic writers apparently inspired Christie Watson to write *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2011). Though a British, married to a Nigerian, she is able to capture the situation of the Niger-Delta in her work. This research work will therefore attempt to establish the relationship between fate and environment as it affects the characters in Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbird Far Away*.

Hannah Swamidoss's (2012) reading of Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbird Far Away* focuses on environmental devastation that occurred in the region due to oil exploration. It equally dwells on impoverished people building a life in the midst of chaos and turmoil. The strength in the midst of unyielding hardship to Swamidoss offers glimmers of hope for the future. Several attempts have been made to correct these ills. Within the purview of the narrative of the Niger-Delta, there is observable gap in scholarship. The issue of fate and environment has not been adequately addressed.

Therefore, this study examines the interplay of fate and environment in the selected narrative towards bringing out the relationship between the two. It is hoped that the point of intersection between the two would create the sense of urgency within individuals in the region on the need to rise to the challenge of regenerating their environment on one hand. On the other hand, it would bring to the fore the cases of neglect in the narrative and how it has affected the characters.

Ecocriticism, Literature and the Environment

The emergence of ecocriticism in the 1980s provides a platform for the study of the relationship between literature and environment. Despite its late emergence, its relevance to the contemporary world has worked to aid its spread. This is all the more important in view of the challenges facing our environment as a result of human activities.

Naturally, ecocriticism is the study of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), a major proponent, sees ecocriticism as the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xvii). Commitment to environmentalist praxis (267) is the major thrust of Buell's definition of ecocriticism that is obvious in the place of the representation of the physical environment in literary works.

Ecocriticism, according to Peter Barry (2002), first arose in the late 1970s at meetings of WLA (the Western Literature Association, a body whose field of interest is the literature of the American West). From then, ecocriticism has continued to spread with a well-established root in the United States of America. Barry states further that ecocriticism in USA takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth century American writers whose works celebrated nature, the life force on the wilderness as manifested in America. They are Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). The focus of ecocriticism is on the analyses of literature and its relationship with the environment. Kerridge (2006: 530) sees this theory as literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist view point, 'Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects, beliefs and ideologies are assessed for their environmental implication' (530).

Ecocriticism deals with the trends and representations of nature in literary works. This entails establishing the relationship between literature and environment. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) considers ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It is the primary concern of ecocritics to see literature's response to environmental issues. Hence, Lawrence Buell (2001) is of the opinion that environmental praxis must be put into consideration when it comes to ecocriticism.

The thrust of ecocriticism, as presently constituted, is derivative from the machinery set in motion by the Romantic writers who accorded priority to emotion, passion, nature and individuality. This is not far-fetched from the environmental harmony that ecocritics crave for in literary texts.

As noble as ecocriticism is in bringing to the fore the relationship that exists between literature and the environment and the need for the preservation of our ecosystem, Barry still holds the view that:

“ecocriticism does not have a widely known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures” (161). What is central to ecocriticism as far as literature and environment is concerned is that, it privileges texts that are profoundly involved with the natural environment. Allen Brizee (2015) observes that both Buell and Glotfelty agreed that the first wave in ecocriticism was between the eighties and nineties. This wave according to Brizee appreciates nature writing as an object of study and a meaningful practice.

The response of literature to environmental problem is environment specific. Barry (2002) points out that the tone of eco writing in America is that of praise and admiration while in the United Kingdom it is more of a caution and warning. Buell (2005) rightly observes that environmental problem is a highly cultural crisis and not discipline specific.

In this trend, Nigeria is not left out. Nigerian scholars have equally responded to environmental concerns as it affects the Niger-Delta region. Nwagbara (2010) opines that, ecocriticism in literature is a form of aesthetics that concerns itself with the nature of relationship between literature and the natural environment (17). This to him is the essence of Ojaide’s poetry as his preoccupation is to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

Hence, Nwagbara uses Ojaide’s poems as a “dependable barometer” to gauge the Nigerian environmental/ecological experience. The fate of the majority of the Niger-Delta region is like that of the casualties of “slow violence” that Nixon (2011) refers to. The poor people in the Niger-Delta region lack basic amenities like pipe-borne water, electricity, good roads, among others. They live their daily lives under the cloud of gas flaring by the multi-national oil companies. Despite the fact that the water used for domestic purpose was from a bore hole, it was coloured almost black and full of odour. It is an irony that their land is bounded by the sea, and they live around rivers and streams, yet they lack good drinking water.

G.G. Darah (2008) is of the opinion that classical traditions of world literature are fostered by environment in which there is struggle against great evils for restoration of human dignity. This is apparently responsible for the radicalisation of literary output from the Niger-Delta region. This is characterised by determinism and fatalism. This has led to environmental activism with a view to creating the desired awareness about the degradation going on in the region.

In view of the foregoing, literary narratives from the region are replete with subject matters and themes that showcase the problems the region and its people are facing as it affects environment.

The continuous neglect of the region has brought about the formation of militant groups like Movement for the Emancipation of Niger-Delta (MEND). This has not in any way changed the fate and lot of the people of the region Nwagbara (2010) observes that:

In man’s quest for freedom and self-actualization lies the tendency to resist or protest against oppressive, repressive ideologies and the re-create wholesome land scope. In engaging this re-creation process, literature is at the heart of it all (20).

This confirms the place of literature as one of the paradigms of change in the society. Literature is thus an instrument of change. This institution needs to be stable for a society to move forward; Nwagbara observes that “for Ojaide, a society cannot prosper without stable institutions (Fried 2007:149). Literature is one of such institutions that can bring advancement to the society (20). Maduka (1981) opines that: ‘there is a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. The principal function of literature is to criticize these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society’ (11).

Literature is now an instrument in the hand of Niger-Delta writers to effect the desired change in the environment. Literary production from this region is predicated on the need for environmental regeneration and justice. This has characterised the writings of Tanure Ojaide, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Kaine Agary, Nnimmo Bassey, Helon Habilah, Christie Watson and Chimeka Garrick, just to mention a few.

The common trend in their works is to foreground the environmental problems of the Niger-Delta since the exploration of oil began in the region

Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* and the Dynamics of Environmental Exploitation

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 has risen at midnight. (Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far away*: 86)

The benevolence of nature is for the good of the people and the environment. Basically, the interaction between man and the environment is aimed at the survival of man. Hence, the environment is always there at the mercy of human for exploration and exploitation. Over the years, the axiom that "nature has a way of replenishing itself" has continued to define the attitude of man towards the environment. The wealth and comfort of human beings from ages past have come from the environment. This is the same way the crude oil of the Niger-Delta region is bringing benefits to so many people in different ways. The exploration of oil in the area for the benefit of a few people at the detriment of the inhabitants and the environment is what the people cannot understand.

Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* is a narrative about the Niger-Delta region that centres on the family of Blessing. The infidelity of Blessing's father is the reason why Blessing, Ezikiel and their mother have to relocate to their grandparents' village close to Warri in the Niger-Delta. They have to give up their comfortable and air-conditioned life in Lagos and settle for the pollution-ravaged Niger-Delta. The shock of this change in fortune is difficult to accept as poverty stares them in the face. They have to make do without clean water, electricity and other basic social amenities. Apart from these, they have the "Sibeye Boys" to contend with. Despite all these, the oil companies profit from the resources of the region. "The water of the Delta is the blood of Nigeria" (20), "our black gold" (215). The communities wallow in sectarian violence. As observed by Jane Housham (2011), the dream of Ezikiel is to become a doctor, but the dire situation in which they find themselves "corrodes dreams and corrupts souls". His dream vanishes as he joins the Sibeye Boys. Grandma becomes Blessing's inspiration". Despite the bleak and gloom of the Delta region and its environment, it does not detract from the humour and love that exist between Blessing and grandmother on one hand and Timi and Dan on the other hand.

Following the indiscretion of Blessing's father, which prompts him to park out of the house, her mother, subsequently, loses her job at the Royal Imperial Hotel. It becomes obvious that they have to relocate as she could not pay rent and sustain the house. Ezikiel's idea of Warri comes from the internet. His internet discovery sets the tone of their experience in the Niger-Delta-region. This is a sharp contrast to the life they live at Better Life Executive Homes, Allen Avenue in Ikeja. They have to contend with myriad of problems the Deltans face. They are now out of their blissful and peaceful environment and heading to the restive Niger-Delta region.

What welcomes them to Warri is what the people experience on a regular basis with hardly any moment of respite. Blessing has this to say 'As we neared Warri, the sky became even brighter. I saw a flame in the distance. A giant torch which made the sky look angry. Pipeline fires, said Zafi. They are burning the gases from the oil. He started coughing again'(12)

The basic pollutant of the air in the Delta is dangerous emission from gas flaring. The host communities have to make do with polluted air. This causes respiratory diseases that endanger the life of the general populace. The health of the people is constantly in danger; danger brought about by years of environmental neglect. The interest of the oil companies is basically to get as much as possible from the environment without any conscious effort at giving back to the environment.

Watson is able to reveal through the travels of Blessing and Grandma across the villages where they have to attend child birth; the terrible conditions of the people who live in abject poverty. The journey to these

villages is anything but pleasant. Blessing has this to say about one of such journeys: “we travelled across the water the smell of oil from the river made me cover my mouth and nose with my scarf” (112).

Environments like this are more than enough to endanger the life of the pregnant woman and that of the unborn child. The condition at Emete’s house is not any better. Here, we see poverty at its very best. “The husband led us to the birth hut, where a young woman lay alone on a woman mat, next to a bucket of oily river water.”(112) Even if there is an emergency, and they need water, what they would use is oily water. This is dangerous for both mother and child. Little wonder that the child did not survive.

Not that the people are lazy or that they are not ready to work; they are simply victims of their environment that is constantly divested by the oil exploiters. The environment is degraded as a result of years of oil exploration and oil spillage. The pollution of land and water of the Niger-Delta region opens the people up to poverty. What the people face is oil-induced poverty. They have nothing to show for their nature-endowed wealth. The swampy settlements lack social amenities and where they exist, they are not functioning.

The schools are not left out. Blessing describes the school environment as “an area of wasteland” (32). The students exhibit poverty with their appearance:

A group of children were running past the sign, all dressed the same, all with wide eyes and no smiles, all with swollen bellies and skinny legs
(33)

The school building has no doors. The sanitary condition is so poor that Blessing has to consider the poor toilet in Alhaji’s house a luxury. This is how she describes the toilet, ‘When I first entered the girls’ toilets at the beginning of lunch time, I could not help running straight back out. A carpet of flies shone blue. There was no window. Seven holes were side by side, girls squatting over them doing their business, their private parts in full view. There was no sink. No tap. No soap. No toilet tissue. I opened my mouth outside and felt burning on my throat’(34).

A condition like this is enough to make one sick. When Blessing finally decides to ease herself what she finds out is equally shocking, ‘I could hear one girl moaning. She was vomiting from one end and was stooling from the other end. It all fell around and about and over the hole. There was no way of cleaning herself up’(35).

Obviously, the student described here has cholera which results from ingestion of contaminated water or food. This is the direct result of the poor sanitary condition of the villages. The waste management is so pitiable. This could be deduced from Blessing’s expression:

I followed Grandma and Celestine to the area at the side of the toilet where the rubbish was held until the rains come to wash it down the river. Things were already piling up, plastic, wire, metal can, broken bottles. They rustled when we arrived. Grandma had told me they saved it all every year, then God washed it away. I wondered where the rubbish ended up, and who lived at the end of the river (58)

It is this same river that they use to wash and cook and even drink in emergencies (20).

Rather than compel the oil companies to invest in the communities to make things better for them, the government is a silent collaborator in the impoverishment and degradation of the Niger-Delta. They benefit from the flagrant impunity of the oil exploiter. Hence, the communities are at the mercy of the expatriates who see no reason why the people should live better. It is unthinkable that government would look the other way when ecoterrorist are busy perpetrating evil against the people and the environment.

The government simply lacks the political will to effect the desired change the Deltans so much crave for. The government blatantly fails the people. The people in power are simply not in tune with the problems of the community people. Even if they are, they are simply insensitive because they are largely

unaffected; as it is those who are exposed to it that feel it. They give the oil companies a free hand to destroy the ecology of the Niger-Delta.

As if it is not enough that the people suffer from their natural endowment, death even eventually becomes their fate. The state agents kill, maim and destroy. They will stop at nothing, even if it is the annihilation of a whole village. The “kill and Go police” often come unannounced. They are all out to prevent any form of agitation that is capable of obstructing the smooth flow of crude oil. A typical example of this is the annihilation of Boneboy’s village. This is what Grandma has to say about the village, ‘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 come and killed the whole village. Boneboy’s parents are dead. Those bloody kill and Go!’ (41).

This brutal action of state agents is traceable to the intricacies surrounding oil production. The production is an unholy alliance between the oil companies, government and politicians. They all combined to rape the Niger-Delta region of the crude oil. In the process, the people and the environment are at the mercy of this cabal. The environment is exploited, explored and exposed. The people are thus disoriented when the government that should protect them is even a part of the problem.

Watson is able to show that the rank and file of the people involved in the struggle to better the lot of the people has been infiltrated by both government and the oil companies. Rather than form a common front in the struggle for the protection of their environment, they engage in ethnic-fighting as a result of the activities of the fifth columnists in their midst that undermine the struggles. One of the chiefs sums it up as:

Area Boy! And those politicians are receiving billions of dollars from the oil companies-it is in their interest to make sure we are all fighting. The Ijaws, Urhobos, Itsekiris and the Ogonis. The government is supplying the different groups with weapons. Rocket launchers! I heard some groups are hiring weapons from the government and police, and paying for day hire! This is genocide! (122).

The possibility of this is due to the intricate nature of oil production in the region which one of the chiefs describes thus, ‘It is a collaboration of the politicians and oil companies. You can’t lay the blame at the oil companies’ feet when our government is taking bribes from them! Our government would not be in power if not for the oil compansy. The oil companies are being allowed to get away with it. “Let us light our pipelines fire”, they say ‘burn our poison gases, destroy the environment, and have, her is a million dollars for your conveniences. We will turn our backs while you wipe our democracy”. The problem is a delicate one! These Sibeye Boys, The gun boys. They are being controlled by the politicians. Eh! The politicians are controlled by the oil companies! The war would not be happening if the oil companies did not pay for the military regime. The oil companies pay direct to the kill and Go police and the army. They do not even hide it. The blood is on their hands’ (121-122).

Blessing finds this difficult to understand. It is clear to her that the oil companies pay the government. The government in turn uses military police against the people who are agitating for resource control and their equitable share of their natural endowment. The crude that is supposed to be a blessing becomes the root cause of the blood flowing in the Delta region. All these, combined, turn the Niger-Delta region to a battle ground. All those concerned are after their own spoil.

This gloomy picture notwithstanding, the activities of the various armed groups detract from the efforts of the genuine freedom fighter. The region is thus unable to present a common front in their quest for a better treatment. Due to this apparent division, degradation, spillage and wanton destruction of the environment on the part of multinational oil companies continued unabated. The environmental injustice the people are subjected to leaves the people defenseless.

Watson is of the opinion that the disorientation of the youths of Niger-Delta is as a result of their traumatic experience. What they experience on a daily basis is a harrowing plundering of their natural

resources by Western Oil Company. They are not in any way empowered to be economically productive. The government failed them. The oil companies did not do better either.

Even if it is their fate to live in that environment, they deserve a better condition of living. Rather, the oil exploiters rape them of their means of economic livelihood. The land, water and air are all polluted. The land is no longer productive because it is degraded. The water is polluted by oil spillage thus destroying the marine life. The air is polluted and causes all kinds of diseases for the people. All these combine to send a lot of people to their early graves. When they die, the people mourn. Hence, it is easy to get Celestine a job as mourner. Grandma reveals that, 'funerals are very big business these days. All these warring and diseases. All there poisons from the oil companies. She sighed! Funerals are good business to work in. Warring and disease and funerals!' (82).

Death thus becomes a regular occurrence in the Niger-Delta to the extent that people help to employ professional mourners to help them mourn during the funeral of their loved ones. Death from environmental rape and oil induced poverty is what the people benefit from what ought to be a blessing to them.

The activities of oil companies with the government as silent collaborator show that they have little regard for the people of the Niger-Delta. Tracy Chapman, in her song, "Subcity" (1989) says:

People say it doesn't exist 'cause no one would like to admit that there is
a city underground where people live everyday off the waste and decay
off the discard of their fellowman

What Blessing and Ezikiel experience in terms of schooling is what most of the youths experience. Their schooling is put on hold because they could not pay their school fees. This is poverty at work. Ezikiel whose ambition is to become a doctor could no longer sustain the dream as he is often out of school. Coupled with the experience the activities of Western Oil Company fostered on them, eventually he has to align with Sibeye Boys. He says; "it is time for a young man like me. It is our time" (33).

The broadcast denies that the Sibeye Boys are involved in illegal arms trade, bunkering of oil, and even the abduction of hostages. Even if they are not involved, they sympathise with those involved. Sibeye Boys are of the opinion that:

... criminals are the politicians with their billions of dollars bank
accounts. The government task forces and oil companies' security forces
have wiped out whole Delta villages. The Sibeye Boys stand for the Ijaw
people. We will fight for the people and take back what is rightfully ours
(151)

The broadcast deny their involvement in any criminal activities, this is however not the truth. It is the group that abducts Dan during his wedding ceremony. Also, Ezikiel's gunshot is from this group. The burn he sustains from a burst oil pipe line fire eventually kills him and many other young boys of his age.

An onlooker might be of the opinion that the people support the Sibeye Boys. Since there is no gain-saying in the fact that, any form of agitation would receive the blessing of the populace. The life of the people has been reduced to nothingness. This is due to the years of continuous crude exploration and exploitation by the ecoterrorists. They perpetrate environmental terrorism by destroying the environment all in the name of crude exploration.

Everywhere you turn to you will see indices of neglect and uncaring attitude on the part of the government, its agents and that of the oil companies who are direct beneficiary of the poverty-stricken Niger-Delta environment. Their water is dark and shiny with a layer of oil (152). Their schools are in a state of disrepair, public utilities are non-existent and where they are available, they do not function. The people live in constant fear that the kill and Go could come at night and do what they know how to do best- kill, destroy and maim the defenseless citizens.

However, the gun runners do not enjoy the blessings of the women. Typical of a mother, they accept that the boys are their children but they condemn their attitude and actions. Grandma has this to say during their naked protest at the front of Western Oil Company, 'Of course we don't support them. We are against those boys! They are not the true freedom fighters! But they are our sons! Grandma shouted' (264)

The kidnap and all the anti-social vices going on in the Niger-Delta region is as a result of the deprivation they face. They have no access to what is theirs by virtue of their being born in that environment. Since man has no control over his own birth place, they are where they are by fate and they have no other place to call their own. Naturally, they should enjoy what their environment has to offer them. Instead of this, they are suffering.

What the protesters want is not what is beyond the reach of government and the oil companies. They express their desire thus, 'We want better future for them. Give us our sons. Give them chances at jobs, health, school. Let our Fish live in the river and our tress grow' (265).

The women clearly demonstrate that violence is not the solution to the problem bedeviling the Niger-Delta. The combat-ready security guards who are often trigger-happy could not but put down their guns when the women were dancing naked. Their action prompts the release of Dan and this is a credit to the never say-die attitude of the Africa women. This exposes the follies of the Sibeye Boys. They have to release Dan after the protest. Since Dan is a white man, they are expected to be happy at his kidnap. Rather, to them, an injury to one is an injury to all. His kidnap is staged during his wedding to Timi. Hence, he is an in-law to grandma. The protest is not all about Dan. As pointed out earlier, it addresses issues beyond Dan.

The people are aware of the benefits and profits the oil companies and government derive from the crude they extract from the region. Yet Grandma sees kidnapping as unnecessary and killings as distraction that should not in any way divert attention from addressing the issues on ground.

The oil companies are taking billions from our land. They know it's not theirs to take...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 *Oyinbos* (236)

Watson points out through Grandma that kidnapping the *Oyinbos* will not in any way bring the desired result. What the people want is a better condition of living and a cleaner environment. They want a safe environment that would support their existence. They are of the opinion that they do not have to suffer while some people are making enough money from their soil. To the white men, kidnapping is a dummy which they let happen to give the militias the crumb of their natural wealth. This is what the protest addresses.

The situation is all the more condemnable because the owners of the wealth are impoverished and living in squalor, what accrues to them is poverty and terrible conditions of living. Watson in her after words reveals that, '... the majority of the people who live in the Niger Delta survive on less than 1 dollar a day. They enjoy none of the enormous wealth generated by the oil-rich land. Many people of the Niger-Delta have no access to schools, health care or clean water, they live with the effect 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 spoiled oil: starvation, asthma, chest infections, cancers, and birth deformities., they live with the threat of violence, rape and death' (287)

Even though Blessing and her family at a time lived at Better Life Executive Home on Allen Avenue, in Ikeja, she hitherto considered the place to be a perfect home environment. Her experience of Dan's place convinces her to think otherwise.

Blessing equally gives a similar description of Western Oil Company compound:

As we neared the Western Oil company compound, the road became smooth and easier to walk on. The rubbish living the roadside disappeared, and even the air smelled fresher the smell of burning stopped suddenly, as though the compound enjoyed its very own pollution-free air. The buildings sparkled and shone above the high walls, reflecting the bright blue of the day (261)

It is very disheartening to have two different worlds in the same community, the world of the oil-exploiters and that of the indigenous people. The people become inferior in their own land. Their existence is at the mercy of the ecoterrorists in the name of oil expatriates who divest the environment. They rob the people of their environment and of their economic livelihood. They are left with poverty and deadly diseases as their lot.

The people's fate is tied to their environment. One way or the other they have to survive even in the face of adverse conditions militating against their very existence. Surviving is paramount in the heart of Grandma as she points out that, We must row in whatever boat we find ourselves (22)

Even though the root of their problem is beyond them as it is a collaboration between the government and the oil companies to keep the people perpetually poor and impoverished by continuous plundering of their environment. What they fail to realise is that: an anthill that is destined to become a giant anthill will become one no matter how many times it is destroyed by elephants (259)

Obviously, the people have the belief that given the right attitude they can earn a living from their interaction with the environment. This is however only possible if the environment witnessed some improvement.

Conclusion

The thrust of this study is to examine the nexus of fate and environment and how the characters have responded to the environment in the narrative of Christie Watson. This work establishes the importance of environment to the survival of mankind, especially the Niger-Delta region. The problems in the region stem from the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity. This sets in motion the chain of events which have left the environment devastated and degraded. It has equally disrupted the ecology of the environment. The viewpoint of Watson in the text is to bring to the fore the nature of problems in the region and the challenges the people face on a daily basis in their quest to earn a living. Since the environment is pivotal to this research, the selected text was engaged using ecocriticism.

It has helped to situate the narratives among the existing narrative from the region characterised by determinism and fatalism.

What is worthy of note about the text is how it been able to depict the vulnerability of the Niger-Delta environment using female figures. When the environment is endangered, women are made to bear the brunt. The heat of the degradation in the environment affects them. They are imperiled by the hazard induced by oil exploration in the Delta region. Their natural endowments being blindly explored have brought untold hardship on them. It is therefore imperative that measures should be put in place to replenish the environment.

Since a human beings have no control over his/her choice of place of birth or the environment to which he/she is born, the fate of human being is closely tied to environment. Hence, the characters accept their fate that the environment where they are meant to live is theirs. This is without prejudice to how the environment has been raped by ecoterrorists in the name of oil exploiters, they have adopted various survival strategies to draw attention to the problems they have to contend with and earn a living.

What Watson has been able to do, apart from expressively laying bare the problems and the challenges that the region and the people face, is to show that acceptance of fate is not synonymous to acceptance of destitution. Even when events fixed by fate cannot be changed, some efforts could still be applied to effect some changes. Hence, people could still make sense out of their interaction with their environment.

Acknowledgments

None


Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest.

Funding Source

The authors received no funding to conduct this study.

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