

Literature and Resistance: A Study of Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway*

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Abstract

The Niger-Delta region in recent times has been experiencing the politics of local resistance which has remained decisively violent, and the indigenes as a result, have been compelled to perceive the oil environment as a metaphor for death and no longer as a source of improved life. This research work explored the violent contestation around a historically construed sense of grievance, injustice, and inequality experienced through wanton exploitation and devastating impoverishment by both the government and trans-national oil companies. Using Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway*, this study further showcased how the degradation and exploitation of the Niger-Delta environment in the course of oil exploration by both the government and oil companies led to the present conflict which has escalated from ethnic minority protests to fully blown insurgency that has attracted worldwide attention. The transition from resistance as mere protests to militancy as represented by attacks on innocent citizens and oil companies, the effects on the female members of the indigene communities and how these women cope are also critically analyzed in the study. The duo of eco-feminism and Marxist feminism are the theoretical frameworks used in the course of this research. The study concludes by recommending that both the government and the oil companies in the region should, as a matter of policy and urgency provide employment and award contracts to the indigenes of the host communities. This way, the youths' restiveness in the region which is mostly caused by joblessness will be nipped in the bud.

Keywords: Resistance, Militancy, Protests, Degradation, Conflicts.

Introduction

In the words of Benita Parry, resistance is simply "the blunt refusal of the oppressed to continue to be

submissive to the oppressor" (7). The persistent conflict in the Niger-Delta first arose in the early 1990s over tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number

of the Niger-Delta's minority ethnic groups who felt that they were being exploited. Thereafter, they put-up resistance by adamantly refusing to accept or comply with the statuesque.

Resistance can also be seen when a group of people in some way(s) disrupt the accepted authority, whether they be the legal authority or an occupying force, in order to upset stability and ultimately bring about change. Examples of resistance that have occurred throughout history include:

- Aba women's riot of 1929, where over twenty-five thousand women gathered in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria to protest the imposition of both warrant chiefs and taxes on the people by the British Colonial administration.
- Rome experienced a slave revolt with Spartacus as the leader. Roman authority eventually quelled the resistance and crucified many of the principal actors.
- Martin Luther, a Catholic monk, disagreed with the way the Roman Catholic church was leading. He famously nailed 95

statements (or theses) to the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His resistance to authority led to the Christian Protestant Reformation.

- John Brown, an abolitionist (opponent of slavery) from Kansas, led a group of people to take control of an armory in what is now West Virginia. His purpose was not to personally use the arms to revolt but to keep what he believed was a corrupt government from using them. His action, along with others, helped bring about the American Civil War.
- During the 1960s many groups staged sit-ins, marches and other acts of resistance against what they saw as the injustice of the US federal government. These actions led to civil rights legislation signed by President Johnson (19).

There are many more examples of resistance both in Nigeria and also around the world. Sometimes, these resistances are successful in their goals and at other times, they are not. However, resistance has often been used by societies to cause change. In the

case of the Niger-Delta, environmental pollution, extreme poverty, high levels of youth unemployment, degradation, discriminatory employment practices against locals by oil companies and socio-economic and political marginalization and neglect by successive administrations constitute the main grievances against the oil companies and the government. These complaints have for a long time left the indigenes feeling 'cheated' out of a fair share of oil revenues because they are politically marginalized by a federal government that is dominated by bigger(non-oil producing) ethnic groups, who in partnership with foreign oil multinationals, exploit their region, take their lands and expose them to environmental degradation. Nwabueze Iheka expressed worries that:

There are deforestations at an alarming rate in our forests to make furniture papers and timber materials, burning down of bushes to make for expansions of roads and to create avenues for tapping of natural resources and mineral resources.

Thousands of animals are being slaughtered on daily basis to meet up with the unending demand for hinds and skins and producers strive to meet up. The numerous rivers worldwide are not left out as these rivers are polluted with oil and other mineral waste in the attempt to explore oil and other natural resources and innocent aquatic creatures are also destroyed in the process. The ozone layer presently is under serious threat as the activities of companies, factories etc. continues to affect it very negatively (41).

As seen from above, environmental problems as a subject matter in literary writings are not limited to man. Many species of different animals have become extinct because of the harmful practices of these oil companies. Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway* used for this study contains ample examples of environmental interest, not only with nature, but also with the people and their

everyday experiences of life in their environment. The study also identifies shades of ecological awareness and the indigenes' negative reactions to the inactions of both the oil companies and the Government as embodied in the novel where the author put in great efforts to effectively convey her messages.

Statement of the Problem

Literary writers recreate human conditions, feelings and attitudes in their works and these writings provide us with hypothetical answers to very important questions. The resistance and hostilities experienced by both the Government and the oil companies at the hands of indigenes of oil producing communities are a direct reaction to the degradation of their physical, social and economic environments. Truly, much has been written by scholars on these, but deserving attention is yet to be given to the reactions of the female members of these communities to these environmental crises. What are these many environmental issues bothering and disrupting the very essence of their existence? Also, what are the various ways that women have been exploited in the Niger-Delta

region? How are these women coping with both the environmental crises and the attendant exploitations? In what ways have they responded to these exploitations and how far did their reactions go in getting the much needed intervention from the right quarters?

These will form the focus for the analysis in this research. Using eco-feminism and Marxist feminism tools, the researcher will investigate, analyze and point out the different views and standpoints related to the above points as seen in the novel under study.

Biography of the Author

Christie Watson is a British novelist and pediatric nurse. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia, where she won the Malcolm Bradbury Memorial Bursary, and has since published short fiction and other writings in numerous magazines. Interestingly, Watson is neither a Nigerian nor does she have any relatives in Niger-Delta, but according to Rosamund Urwin, the author had revealed in an interview that she had visited the Niger-Delta years ago with her partner and father of her two children and had never been

able to erase the memories of what she witnessed during the visit. For her, “there was a story everywhere she turned” (6).

Theoretical Framework

The researcher adopted two theories in the course of this research work. The theories of Eco-feminism and Marxist Feminism. Eco-feminism is a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society. According to the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, eco-feminism is a branch of feminism and political ecology. Eco-feminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to analyze the relationships between humans and the natural world.

Marxist feminism on the other hand is a strand of feminism from a philosophical viewpoint that blends and extends the Marxist theory. Meggy Desai opines that “Marxist feminism examines the ways in which women are exploited and oppressed through capitalism and ownership of private property by individuals” (119).

The confrontations and resistances which abound in the novel selected for this study are not limited to nature; hence they are not equally limited to only ecological discourse. Marxist feminism which is a philosophical variant of feminism that incorporates and extends the Marxist theory will equally serve as a discourse in this research. This is because it is not only the pollution and dilapidation of the landscape and waterscape of the Niger-Delta that the characters had to deal with, but there was also the economic impoverishment of the people and their alienation from their cultural inheritances, plus the oppression that especially the female characters were subjected to and their resistance in the face of the exploitations as evidenced in the novel under study.

The four major female characters in the novel understood and applied this method of feminism in their wars against the oil companies. They negotiated smartly, and compromised where necessary. They knew just where, when and how to strike and these tactics ultimately got them victories where their male counterparts had tried all else and failed.

A smart feminist gets what she wants through negotiation and compromise, she knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; she also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, she knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. She is a smart woman who uses different strategies to achieve what she wants in a subtle manner and she is always strategizing. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process and does not necessarily have to be a violent struggle against men.

An Overview of the Novel

Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* was so outstanding that it won the 2011 Costa first novel award. Betty Froust in her review of the literary work says and I quote:

Nearly everyone can relate with the happenings in the novel. When their mother (Timi) catches their father with another woman, twelve

year-old Blessing and her fourteen-year-old brother, Ezikiel, are forced to leave their comfortable home in Lagos for a village in the 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 suspiciously late into the night to pay the children's school fees. Her brother, once a promising student, seems to be falling increasingly under the influence of the local group of violent teenage boys calling themselves Freedom Fighters. Her grandfather, a kind but misguided man, is trying on Islam as his new religion of choice and even brings in a second wife. But

Blessing's grandmother, wise and practical, soon becomes a beloved mentor, teaching Blessing the ways of midwifery in rural Nigeria" (6).

The novel, later selected as one of CNN's Summer reads, was classified by the *Peoples' Magazine* as "a sure-footed debut narrated by 12-year-old Blessing, a girl growing up too fast in the troubled Niger-Delta". She is exposed to the horrors of genital mutilation and the devastation wrought on the environment by 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. *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* is the witty and beautifully written story of one family's attempt to survive a new life they could never have imagined, struggling to find a deeper sense of identity along the way.

Cleveland Plain describes the work as an "assured, absorbing first novel...Watson's cleanly told

coming-of-age story generates real narrative momentum.

She is generous in her assessment of human nature, and her novel surprises even as its sense of danger is never truly at bay. It is ultimately a triumphant book"(4). *The National Herald* records that the novel is:

"an impressive debut...Watson's nuanced portrayal of daily life in Nigeria is peopled with flawed but tenacious characters that fight not only for survival, but for dignity. Blessing is a wonderful narrator whose vivid impressions enliven Watson's sensual prose. She is bright and observant and she makes the novel a memorable debut about her coming of age" (2).

Kirkus Reviews agrees that this novel in "confronting issues of race, class, and religion,

ponders idealistic ignorance in a way that is reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. Watson's story will appeal to readers of African and literary fiction." Also, *Library Journal* "Through the lens of a young girl's coming-of-age, this breakthrough novel views the politics of contemporary Nigeria, portraying the clash between traditional and modernity as it affects one's extended family." And finally, according to *Barnes and Noble Review*, *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway* is; "A first novel that knows how to tell a story, concocting a voice that lures; some novelists have it, and from the very first page of her very first book, Christie Watson proves she possesses it, creating a voice that tells a tale we were not able to put down till the end."

Female Exploitation and Resistance in Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway*

Several studies have examined the connection between African women and climate change. Amadi posits that the Niger-Delta women are among the most susceptible to the negative effects of climate change. He further states that as yields from healthy ecosystems decline, women

become more susceptible to negative socio-economic pressures (13). He further avers that:

Climate change and global warming have impacted women disproportionately. For example, in Africa, the majority of women live off land resources, and as such, they are adversely affected by climate related problems such as famine and pollution, which invariably lead to many other complications. A case in point is the Niger-Delta, where years of reckless exploitation of oil resources and the resultant pollution of the environment have affected many communities in the region with the extraction of oil being the main cause of (environmental) degradation in the region (16).

Oge Anene has also established in a previous research, that "women are the first respondents to and primary victims of man-made environmental disasters in the Niger-Delta. In situations of crises, women bear the brunt of the problems arising from

such crises. Apart from these, women constitute about seventy percent of those who are poor in the world, and in the developing world they are the poorest” (19). In the Niger Delta, the situation is not different, as the women suffer both the confiscation of their agricultural land by the government and multinationals on the one hand, and rape and other assaults by oil workers and soldiers on the other hand.

Nutsukpo defines socio-cultural exploitation as the social conditioning of women to accept patriarchal ideologies and esteemed beliefs which degrade and expose them to manipulation and exploitation (139). Many of the female characters in this text were victims of this form of exploitation. Christie Watson’s *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway* tells the story of Blessing and her family, consisting of her mother and brothers who were tossed down from their comfortable position in the society after their father left them for another woman.

This singular act leads the family from their high-end area in Lagos, to their maternal grandparents’ village in Warri. Timi, their mother is the first female character to suffer exploitation in the novel.

Beginning with emotional exploitation when she caught her husband red-handed with another woman and he chose the woman over her and their two children to the fact that soon after he left them, she was sacked from Royal Imperial Hotel where she was working because they employed only married women. Watson captured it thus through Blessing the narrator:

It was a month after father left that Mama had to stop working at the Royal Imperial Hotel. She said that the owners employed only married women. Since father left, I did not dare ask her anything at all. I did not especially dare ask her if she was no longer married to father (8).

It was devastating for both Blessing and Ezekiel when their father left. Things got so bad that they were finally ejected from their residence and their Mama had to take them to her parent’s home in Warri, Niger-Delta region. They suddenly found

themselves without running water and electricity, good roads and all the basic amenities they had become used to in Lagos.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in analyzing the problem of gender inequality avers that gender inequality is a prominent feature in many societies where males are in better position in economic, social and political matters. Stereotyping of gender sprouts gendered identities which restricts the attitudes of men and women (162-163). The inevitability of gender inequality in Africa is simply because of the patriarchal nature of the society. Murphy state that patriarchy allows men to enjoy power while subjugating the female folks (4).

The above applies to Grandmother, Timi's mother who Blessing and Ezikiel her brother had no prior knowledge of and who resided in a village in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria. She is another female character that was subjected to exploitation in the novel. Because of the condition of the society which influences her mindset, she sees her husband, Alhaji as a superior being that requires her constant service and worship. In fact, her main priority in her

marriage is her husband's happiness. So much so that when Alhaji decided to get a new wife, she gave him her support even when it broke her heart. The narrator captured it in the words below:

I thought of Alhaji marrying Celestine. We had not been invited to the wedding. I had heard Alhaji telling Grandma that it would be a simple ceremony at Celestine's village. When Alhaji had disappeared for almost a week, nobody spoke about the wedding, but still, I had noticed grandma crying. It had made me never want to hear about the wedding ceremony at all (67).

In the African setting traditionally, most women have been relegated to certain roles based on human, biological or perceived sex of masculinity and femininity. These roles include fetching water for domestic use, nurturing kids, cooking, farming, getting fire woods for cooking from the forest,

until my legs go dey start to bleed?...

Me and your first wife work from morning to night so you fit carry our money go thruway for ashewo and brandy? You think we are stupid women who will continue to be your slave? (211-212).

sweeping etc. All these roles have programmed the woman as 'homemaker' while a man is the 'breadwinner'. Yet, we find Alhaji economically exploiting Grandma by letting her do it all including being the breadwinner. Timi her daughter equally suffered the same fate, as her husband never sent upkeep money after leaving her for another woman neither did he care about the kids' schooling even after they were forced to drop out because of their mother's inability to pay their fees. Surprisingly, it was Celestine the new wife of Alhaji that 'covered her head with a basket' and spoke out very rudely to Alhaji:

Na you suppose provide for your family. Where is the money? Only oyibo support this family. Wey the money? You say you fit handle two wives, when you cannot even support me! Do you think I am happy being a professional mourner? Going to someone's death and shouting till my lung is empty and I cannot speak? Or to dey waka through the town sometimes for many hours

Even Celestine, the new wife got to be exploited in the novel too. Also little Blessing who was not up to thirteen years yet was equally exploited and nearly raped by a police officer if her grandma had not acted quickly and doubled the bribe money for the officer. Many of the women in their oil rich community of Warri were equally exploited and looked down on. Their husbands and sons were joining the dreaded freedom fighters who killed and kidnapped indiscriminately and in the unceasing wars that ensued, the women were made casualties.

Irele explains that:

the remarkable entry of women writers into African literature has enabled them to depict themes about their social condition concerning polygamy and male domination,

their economic life in modern society, and their participation in national politics in the new African states. Therefore, though there are attempts to represent the exploitation of nature and women in African literary works, gender injustice and environmental crises are still serious issues that require further investigation into how they are represented and discussed in contemporary African literature (19).

This simply means that the majority of women's oppression and exploitation, as well as the exploitation of nature and other victimized human and non-human groups, share the same fate in the world. According to James Smith, "many eco-feminist theorists argue that there is no primary form of oppression because all oppressions are interconnected and reinforce one another (14).

Watson focuses on the plight of women through the female characters from all generations being

marginalized in all spheres. Through Timi, she demonstrates the domestic abuse and disrespect that economically dependent wives sometimes face from their abusive husbands. The contrast between urban and rural set-ups further highlights how the female child and even mothers are vulnerable to the traditions and social dynamics. Blessing's education is placed on a halt for her older brother Ezekiel to pursue his own education. Rather than sulk and complain, she becomes her grandmother's apprentice and she learns midwifery which happens to be the trade of the family, thereby showcasing the resilience of women amidst all the threats around them as they embrace the chaos and challenges and come out even stronger.

Christie additionally focused on the exploitation of females through the tradition of female genital mutilation that affirms the push and pull between outdated traditions and modern science. It stresses the threat to the African girl child at a young age and during child birth which also prompts the discourse on early marriage and gender inequality. However, the novel offers a glimpse to the need of embracing modern mindsets, by speaking through Blessing

who promised to scrape out that negative aspect when she completely takes over the family midwifery services from grandma.

The Female Characters' Roles and Coping

Mechanism in the Novel

Traditionally, women are expected to keep silent when important matters were considered, as silence is regarded as a feminine virtue yet, Uchendu contradicts that when she defined feminism as “an expression of women’s conscious efforts towards preserving their independence and fighting for their rights” (4). And the four major female characters in the novel Timi, Blessing, Grandma and Celestine also deconstructed this view, broke tradition and vehemently stood up to confront and ultimately overcome their individual challenges in the text.

An in-depth exploration of the female characters in the novel and their roles in environmental resuscitation and sustainability and also in generally fighting for and defending the ideals they believed in showed that far from being passive, women are at the centre of environmental activism and have a

critical role to play in the resuscitation and sustainability of the Niger-Delta.

In 2012, over seven hundred women from different generations and ethnic groups in the state – Ijaw, Itsekiri and Ilaje - came together in an alliance with young people in actions against Chevron oil firm. The women held this at the company’s Escravos facility near Warri. They demanded jobs for their sons and husbands, investment in the local infrastructure and a cleanup of the environmental damage caused by oil exploration. For ten days, refusing to move, they blocked the production of oil. This was a huge achievement because the different ethnic groups had previously been in conflict with each other for many years over the meager resources handed out by government and oil companies (31).

This scenario also played out in Watson’s *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway*. The family had lost Dan to kidnappers and Ezikeil to a pipeline fire explosion and they were overwhelmed with grief. Grandma frustrated that both Timi and Blessing appeared not be recovering at all planned the protest and got Blessing and Celestine to join. They started in front of the Western Oil Company to make them aware of

the poverty and sickness they were causing to the indigenes in the villages. The fascinating thing about the protest is that the protestors were women who all decided to go naked to make the oil companies feel ashamed of themselves. Grandma told Blessing "The most powerful thing is a naked woman."(302).

Watson presents women and their role in the vanguard of fighting against the atrocities of the Western Oil Company and military government in the Niger-Delta region. The women see the need to ensure peace and safe environment in their Delta-region and they stand firmly towards its realization. They organized nude protest to show the extent of their concerns on the exploitative activities and degradation being unleashed on their environment and the local people by the oil company in their different communities (263-265).

It is through this nude protest that they bring to limelight issues of environmental degradation, lack of social amenities, internal war and unemployment they suffer as a result of the negligence of the Western Oil Company in fostering their own selfish gain in the region. And Grandma was right about the

powers of a naked woman, for soon after the protest, the kidnappers released Dan. Watson captured the highlights of the protest in Grandma's word below:

As the cameras flashed, Grandma shouted, "Look at us, your sisters and daughters and mothers! Look at our disgrace. You all ought to feel shame! She stood in front of us all, waving her fists and her breasts at the western oil company windows. She looked older naked and the security men surrounding the western oil company had turned their backs away one by one. Their shoulders were shaking. Those men would never recover. They placed their rifles on the floor one by one and walked away in a line (303).

This role that the women played in environmental advocacy in the Niger-Delta just so they can protest the exploitations and reclaim what is rightfully theirs is phenomenal. They easily put aside age, ethnicity, colour and social status and all came together to say no to oppression and injustice. Besides the oil company, even their boys and men who were escalating the violence were equally shamed into listening to their voice, for these Niger-Delta women are among the most vulnerable victims of environmental degradation across the globe whose experiences, individual or collective, have hitherto been silenced, with devastating effects.

They suffer from double oppression: firstly, as victims of male oppression exerted through traditional socio-cultural practices and secondly, as immediate victims of environmental pollution because their livelihoods as farmers and fisherwomen mean that they wholly depend on the land, which is itself under threat from sustained pollution and degradation. Amadi Agena discusses this double deprivation; that is environmental degeneration and the subordination of women and

she thereafter avers that “the feminist environmental debate argues that there is need for the removal of environmental obstacles and domination which undermine women’s equality” (362).

Conclusion

Female characters in the text play significant roles in the plot of the story. The four of them significantly represent feminist leaders who advocate for the emancipation of their respective communities. These female characters exist in a world that does not provide opportunities for women to thrive. Rather, their worlds are saturated with condescension and controlled by male characters that render the societies physically and psychologically unstable.

However, these female characters bravely rise to the occasion by consistently voicing the message of change; their responses towards liberation go beyond themselves and further extend towards the regeneration of their physical environments which are characterized by violence, oppression, and environmental pollution. They recognize the connection between their own oppression and the damages to the environment so they seize scarce

opportunities available to them to confront and challenge the status quo. They bravely work towards their own liberation as women and also the liberation of their environment.

Timi, Blessing, Grandma and Celestine in *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway*, are good examples of women who were in the fore-front of the fight for the preservation of nature and for their communities.

They surmounted all obstacles and also showed that women can be able partners in progress in the continuous and constructive transformation of the Niger-Delta region and beyond.

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