

## **Human-driven Environmental Threats in Contemporary Nigerian Literature: An Eco-critical Discourse of Christie Watson's *Tiny SunBirds Far Away***

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### **Abstract**

*The current ecological and climate related crises in most vulnerable countries like Nigeria are due to the unchecked unsustainable practices for short term survival. These unsustainable and unabated human-driven activities pose significant threats to the nation's ecosystems through widespread oil pollution leading to climate issues, ecological refugees, biodiversity loss, land degradation, pollution of air, water and farmland which in turn result in the humanitarian crisis today. Nigeria's eco-writers as eco-warriors aptly rise to the occasion through their works by exposing man's inhumanity to nature, with the aim of creating critical thinking and deeper understanding of the devastating consequences of human-driven actions as well as strive for harmony via policies and ecological stewardship. It is against this backdrop that this paper explores the environmental deep concern in Christie Watson's *Tiny SunBirds Far Away* (2012). It employed 'Postcolonial ecocriticism as its theoretical framework to portray the continued negative impacts of the legacy of environmental imperialism in ex-colonies like Nigeria. It also highlighted Watson's vivid portrayals of the consequences human-driven actions on the planet Earth, with a view to transform humanity's relationship with the natural world from that of exploitation to sustainable harmonious coexistence. This study concluded that, Nigeria's environmental and climate issues are mostly exacerbated by the continued unsustainable and unabated human-driven actions, inadequate environmental safe guards, unpatrioticism, greed and eco-ignorance, hence recommended the use of the moral Eco-ethics enshrined in eco-narratives to create ecological consciousness to mitigate the ongoing ecological crisis posing threat to the planet and future generations.*

**Keywords:** *Nigerian Eco-narratives, Anti-eco-activities, Climate issues, Deep ecological concern, Collective-action, Sustainable practices*

### **Introduction**

The current unchecked eco-unfriendly activities in Nigeria destroy its ecosystems, displace wildlife, as well as posing threats to both environment and human health. Moses Africa Adakonye, lends his voice to this, when he asserts that, "... The extractive activities and other eco-unfriendly activities in Nigeria have been noted to be significant contributors to environmental issues and climate crisis in Nigeria" (1). Consequently, the nation is currently grappling with the complex climate issues like unpredictable acidic rain, farmers'/herds-men conflicts, global warming, communicable disease, floods, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, prolonged droughts, crop failures and rapid desertification, photochemical smog, ocean acidification among others. It is also in view of these that Joyce Onoromhenre Agofure and

Umar Mohammed Aisha, in *African Philosophy: The Questions of Climate Change and the Environment* observe that:

The adverse effects of environmental degradation on Africa's socio-economic landscape persist as a significant obstacle to both developmental progress and the daily livelihoods of its inhabitants. This situation further exacerbates the emission of greenhouse gases, which are the primary drivers of climate change and its associated ramifications. For example, in Africa, the Niger Delta concern foregrounds the extent to which ecological disquiet is ensuing with negative impact on the welfare and livelihood of its inhabitants... (1)

Similarly, Sule Egya as one of Nigeria's eco-defender and warrior, in his work titled "*Nature Environment and Activism in Nigerian Literature*," also expresses his deep eco-concern over the nation's present state of environmental situation:

The Nigerian landscape experiences significant strain due to the construction of technological infrastructure, which exerts considerable influence on the natural environment... Nigeria is currently grappling with the consequences of climate change, primarily characterised by an increase in precipitation, resulting in excessive rainfall, flooding, erosion, desertification, and drought, etc. the literary works are concerned with the creation of the modern space, through urbanisation to cater for modern life and how the creation profoundly affects the physical environment... (6)

From the foregoing, it is evident that the state of man and nature's relationships in Nigeria have been disrupted as a result of the desecration of the environment as well as present wide spread anthropocentric worldviews and unchecked human actions. These compound the nation's climate issues and heightens its fragility risk. This is what Senayon Olaoluwa considers to be "environmental neglect". (185). Ike Okonta and Douglas, also tag this situation as an act of "killing the goose" that lays Nigeria's golden eggs, a metonym for crude oil." (56). To the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), human activities are responsible for climate change and that human impact is exacerbating the frequency and severity of extreme climate events such as heatwaves, heavy rainfall, and droughts. They further observe that, "It is likely that land temperatures over Africa will rise faster than the global land average, particularly in the more arid regions and that the rate of increase in minimum temperatures will exceed that of maximum temperatures" (22.2.1.2). These are likely some of the dreadful experimentations that may form part of human realities in a few years to come. Following, this disturbing phenomenon, many Nigerian eco-writers as eco-defenders rise to the occasion through different evocative eco-narratives and sharp critique of the modern notion of "progress" which has historically led to the manipulations and exploitation of nature. This is with a view to transform ecological deep concern into compelling literary art that strive for harmony and ecological stewardship. It is against this background that this paper explores Christie Watson's deep socio-ecological concern in her *Tiny SunBirds Far Away* (2012), with the aim of showcasing how the utilitarian values of Nigerian eco-narratives can be used to change the present blind anthropocentric attitudes.

### Theoretical Framework

The dialogical interplay between postcolonial theory and ecocriticism is termed postcolonial ecocriticism by postcolonial eco-critics like Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin and among others. It is an emerging analytical literary theory that deviates from the 'mainstream Eco-criticism'. It rejects the idea of development that propels the growth of global corporate interest and puts forward a development that takes cognizance of the people's culture, history

and future. It is a literary criticism that emphasizes how colonial exploitation has led to lasting impacts on post-colonies' psyche and ecosystems, it thus frowns at development that destroys the people's habitat and preoccupation and reduces non-humans to expendable materials or a mere means to an end, hence its adoption as the theoretical framework of this study.

### **The Intricate Human-Nature Relationship in Literature**

Nature is typically characterised by its inherent naivety and purity, which blooms wonderfully in its unadulterated state, upon which human existence is dependent. The natural environment holds significant importance in the lives of humans, as it plays a crucial role in their existence and well-being. Without the presence of nature, humans would lack the necessary resources and conditions required for their sustenance and development. The natural environment offers humans a sense of comfort and facilitates a more convenient way of life. Human beings are integral parts of ecosystems and depend on the functions performed by the ecosystems. In addition to this, a healthy ecosystem produces the necessities of life, such as oxygen, purify and detoxify the air and water, and regulate our weather and climate. It provides food and resources for economic growth and means to fight natural hazards. It is in line with this that eco-writers and eco-activists strongly hold a shared underlying concept that human culture is intricately interconnected with the physical environment, exerting influence upon it and being influenced by it, as one integrated whole. This simply means that human health and survival are intrinsically linked to the health of the ecosystems and the entire planet.

The fact is like every other species on the planet; humans depend on a healthy ecosystem for their ecological balance and optimum survival. It is in line with this that Niyi Osundare observed that "They too are of the earth", linking the people to the same planet regardless of their circumstances or actions. Pansuriya Vibhuti, also in "Harmony between Human and Nature in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*", avers that "Nature is the most important part of human life; without nature, man is nothing. Nature provides human life comfort and makes life easy." (2). Mores so, Scott Slovic, in his essay "A Basic Introduction to Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature", affirms that, "Try to imagine a society or even an individual human being that does not require some form of interaction with the natural world in order to exist" (1).

Again, in an article titled "Roots of Ecocriticism: An Exploration of the History of Ecocriticism: A Literary Theory of the Post-Modern World," Vathana Fenn posits that the interconnectedness between human existence and the natural world is so profound that, "It prevents the possibility of humans separating themselves from its influence, as such individuals are compelled to embrace the dual aspects of nature, encompassing its abundance and challenges..." (118). Ralph Emerson, also in his essay, "Nature" suggests that "we should not observe nature but actively consider to what end it is nature ..." (3). Similarly, Vibhuti, in "Harmony between human and Nature in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*", adds that:

Sometimes nature becomes cruel because people are not using it positively. Human beings do not respect nature. So, nature becomes risky for them. Pollution can also have an effect on nature and man's health. Pollution has an effect on nature too.... If human beings exploit nature and are cruel to it, nature takes revenge on them. Human beings cut trees, waste water, harm animals, and pollute the air. Thus, nature takes revenge and becomes harmful for human health... (2)

The foregoing, explain the ecological principles of interconnectedness of all life, as well as the complex dynamic relationships between human and natural world moving beyond seeing nature

merely as a backdrop for human drama to portray it as an active and interconnected force. It also reveals the reason why man must ensure the well-being of all parties involved with the integrated cycle of life. This relationship has occupied a significant space in literary imagination over the centuries. Eco-narratives argue against a rigid separate of nature and culture, viewing human culture as inextricably connected to the physical world, affecting it and being affected by it in a mutual symbolic coexistence. More so, inextricability of human and nature in environmentalist writing or green discourse unpacks the state of Nature following humanity's business on the planet.

From Rachel Carlson's *Silent Spring* to Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and from Lawrence Buell's "Writing for an Endangered World" to "The End of Nature" by Bill McKibben, the debate has been on the consequences of the interface between Nature and people's activities on the planet. Nature is in this respect a victim of human cultural agent reflected in literature known as ecocriticism which Peter Barry describes as a criticism that does not follow a universal model but rather examines human emotions and experiences as reflected in literary works in relation to their respective environments. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature (and other cultural forms) and the physical environment with the goal of challenging anthropocentric (human-centered) worldviews and promoting an eco-centric (earth-centered) perspectives and fostering environmental awareness and sustainable coexistence between human and the non-human world. In essence, eco-genre serves as potent medium of reflecting on our moral and ethical responsibilities towards the non-human world and for ensuring a more sustainable world and envisioning a more sustainable future. Indeed, this is the ultimate concern of eco-literature and it is also in view of this, that Egya, observes that, "...unless the relationship based on interdependence is sustained, there may be no environmental future for Nigeria, no matter the degree of activism" (2).

### Textual Analysis

Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* is a contemporary Nigerian eco-narrative that exposes the primary drivers of environmental and climate issues in the Niger Delta and its catastrophic 'domino effects on setting (place), characters in the novel. Michael Olughu, affirms this in his essay, "Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, when he asserts that "Watson's novel is a portrayal of utter devastation and exploitation of the Niger Delta environment by the activities of the oil companies..." (98). Watson's eco-narrative presents the dystopia vision of ecological collapse, in order to suggest that only through changing from anthropocentric worldviews in Nigeria and working in harmony with nature that the nation's environment would be safe. This is revealed in the novel through Mama's intention to join her parents in "Warri" in the Niger Delta oil-rich region as a result of her unbearable predicaments in Lagos.

Mama's intention to return to "Warri" in the Niger Delta is stubbornly greeted in the novel by her son Ezikiel who perceives her decision as "suicidal" due to his knowledge of the devastating impacts of 'oil and gas flaring' on the environment and humanity in the region. He says to Mama and his sister Blessing, "Warri is not safe... I goggle 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." (13). The narrator, also reveals Ezikiel's feelings of uncertainty about his mother's decision, "I could feel the panic in Ezikiel's voice. It made the word sound angry" (13). No doubt, this reveals the uncertainty in "Warri" a major town in the oil-producing region in Nigeria. Mama tries to convince Ezikiel, her son that, "I grew up there and I was safe ... Warri is a great place to grow up. But honestly Warri had its own vibes, it was really fun" (13). He then responded, "Well, it's changed then..." (14). This is the 'unavoidable truth' about the present state of things in "Warri".

Furthermore, the narrator reveals that, “It is unusual to hear Mama disagree with Ezikiel her son and even stranger to hear her cry, Ezikiel says “I didn’t want to leave Lagos...” This depicts Ezikiel’s unwillingness to go to “Warri” because to him, “It’s dangerous. The whole Delta region. And if we don’t get shot, the bacteria and parasites will surely kill us.” He shook his head and disappeared to his bedroom.” (14). Indeed, Mama’s views about Warri, were quite true because before the discovery of oil, the Niger Delta region was a pure green landscape with clean river that supported both agriculture and fishing but with the discovery of oil, oil companies’ activities threatened both human and the non-human lives and sending them to early grave. In fact, with the discovery of crude oil things changed drastically. The of exploration of oil, turned ‘Warri and the entire Niger Delta’ ‘danger zones and inhabitable places’. This is evident in the family first contact with the ‘Warri’. The narrator reports thus:

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... Warri even smelled different from Lagos. I closed my eyes and sniffed. The air smelled like a book unopened for a very long time and smoky as though the ground had been on fire. (19-20)

The above snippet shows the high level of unabated pollution by the Western Oil Company operating in Warri, through oil spills and gas flaring leading pollution of land, water and air in the Niger Delta. No doubt, this confirms Ezikiel’s eco-anxiety triggered by his information about the environmental damage in “Warri” and its severe impacts in the nation’s oil-rich region. Mama’s journey to Warri marks the revelation of the potential danger in the oil region where “giant torch and burning of gases from oil” which makes the sky angry in the novel. A “giant torch” which made “sky” angry and burning of gases from oil” in the narrator’s speech refers to Watson’s symbolic representation of the “imagery of destruction” as oil spills and gas flaring portend danger to the entire ecosystems while the personified “sky” is an “imagery of nature” being affected by gas flaring.

In Warri, Mama and her family are compelled to face the stark reality of socio-ecological situation. They had to contend with parasites, polluted water, farm lands, non-existence of social amenities, countless political crises and insecurity issues. These are manifestation of the pains and suffering in Warri which encompasses both physical and emotional state of the locals. The narrator further says, “... I saw flame in a distance... They are burning the gasses from the oil. He stated coughing again...”. This depicts pollution of the air and water through gas flaring by the Western Oil Companies, leading to environmental crisis that triggers humans and nonhuman issues in the oil region.

Again, the pollution of the “river” in the novel through oil spills and gas flaring which in turn threatens the ecosystems and livelihoods of the oil communities and the nation as a whole is the ultimate concern of Watson’s novel. The “river” represents “imagery of nature”, life, livelihood and cultural identity to the locals as well as, a symbol of their heritage, strength and struggles. Christian Otobotekere as a true son of Niger Delta, affirms this. In his words, once you are born, you would be thrown into the river and that worked well for us. The ritual of washing a new born baby in the river is one way of immersing the child in nature of demonstrating the connectedness, interdependence of human and nonhuman. Kensaro-wiwa also reveal the significance of the river to the riverine people in the Niger Delta, when he says, the symbol of his people, ravaged heritage and way of life, sacred place poisoned by oil pollution, as captured in Watson’s novel by Blessing:

... 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...the river smelled like Warri, of old books that had been left in the rains. (35-36)

In addition to the above revelations by Blessing in the novel, Boneboy and Ezikiel went for swimming in the river and also share their horrible experiences that, "Boneboy had to swim through the air only, as he could no longer swim in the river because of the oil spills. I thought of washing my body in an oil spill. Surely, there was no point..." (82). Obviously, this encounter reveals how the locals are denied their entitlement and main source of livelihoods, making them vulnerable to environmental changes in the region. Here, the health of the river and the entire ecosystem is threatened by the unabated pollution from the industrial waste and oil spills leading to severe environmental degradation as well as, pushing human and the nonhuman to the brink. Thus, 'oil on water' in Warri depicts worse cases of human and nonhuman waste and pollution in the Niger Delta and the entire nation. Mark Dummett, a human rights researcher with the Amnesty International, affirms this when he submits that, "The Niger Delta region is well recognized as a highly contaminated area, ranking among the most polluted regions globally and the companies responsible are still displaying this level of negligence" (1). Coral Wu also gives an insight to this situation that, "The oil boom exacerbated the Ogoni marginal situation. Not only were the Ogoni blocked from equal participation in new national wealth, but their land was exploited and severely polluted by the oil industry..." (184).

Furthermore, the United Nation's Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, during the summit in November, 2021 and other subsequent summits, warns that, "addiction of fossil fuels is pushing humanity to the brink: We are faced with stark choice: Either we stop it or it stops us ..." (1). Hans Bertens also cautions that, "we are abandoning our status as humans altogether and are joining the side of (unnatural) technology with our breast implants, pacemakers ... we are on our way to become the cyborgs of science fictions films, half human, half machine' (203). This invariably means that if human activities that threaten or harm human and nonhuman live in Nigeria are not properly checked, the nation will continue to be susceptible to more environmental crises.

### **Concern for Lack of Safety Guidelines and Expertise in the Novel**

Watson depicts lack of 'safety guidelines and expertise' by the multinational oil companies in her novel, as one of the reasons for the continued unabated pollution in the oil region. This is to show her concern for competence and efficiency for sustainable performance in Nigeria as a whole. This resonates with Alhaji's speech in the novel:

... 'As a petroleum engineer for the last twenty-three years, I would ensure quality and improve standards. It is a very important role. Essential work, you see, and who is better than me, with a Diploma in Petroleum Engineering and a local resident. I will be able to set in place guidelines and protocols for the maintenance and safety of the oil production. Guidelines, you see?' .... 'I would monitor the pollution effects on the environment,' ... I know how to check the emission of pipelines, how to maintain quality of the oil, how to make it superior... (146-147)

From the above speech, Alhaji attributes one of the reasons for environmental degradation in the oil-rich region as a combination of inadequate expertise among oil engineers and the absence of well-defined norms for safeguarding the environment. What Cajetan Iheka in his dissertation, describes as, "... They continue to treat these African environments as if they were empty of people or constituted by disposable people, despite the fact that these firms have adopted different practices in their home countries and other western countries..." (9). Nnimmo

Bassey, also lends his voice to this situation, "... oil exploration operations in the Niger Delta are done without the least regard for the safety of the least community and the environment..." (45-58). Watson portrayal of the Western Oil Company's unethical mode of operation and use of incompetent personals through Alhaji in the novel, is with a view to reveal other reasons behind the unabated environmental damage in the Niger Delta and the entire nation. This also implies that the government regulatory bodies for the implementation of environmental guidelines in the oil-producing region and the entire nation are either complicit or not doing enough.

### Locals' Eco-ignorance, Anti-eco-activities and Implications in the Novel

While most eco-writers in Nigeria concentrate on the pollution of the environment by the oil companies, Watson aptly draws our attention to the locals' eco-anxiety, eco-ignorance and disregards for the atmosphere which in turn intensifies the region's environmental and socio-economic problems. In the novel, the narrator recounts that:

I followed Grandma and Celestine to the area at the side of the toilet where the rubbish was held until the rains came to wash it down the river. Things were already pilling up. Plastic, wire, metal cans, and 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 ...she had made up plastic buckets full of river water against the bushes ... (95)

The above incident of indiscriminate waste disposal, reveals the unguided actions of members of the host community which depict their eco-ignorance and lack of understanding of the consequences of their actions on the environment. No doubt, this act of mismanagement of solid and hazardous waste has serious impact on the ecology, as it ends up in the ocean. In most cases, the locals perpetuate some of these ant-ecological activities to justify their ‘religious and superstitious beliefs’ which is revealed in the conversation between Blessing and Ezikiel in the novel. Blessing narrates that, “[Grandma] told me that witches and wizards were thrown into the river after they had died which was the reason not to drink the river water” (112). The fact here, is that throwing of human dead bodies and rubbish like plastic, wire, cans and broken bottles into the “river” do not only pollute the river but affects the life span of marine wildlife and other organisms which lead to a host of consequences like species extinction, resource scarcity and the destabilization of the Earth’s climate. To this end, it is unequivocal that the locals’ action is also detrimental to the ecosystems, because throwing of dead bodies and other objects into the “river” is antithetical to the principle of eco-sanity. In the same vein, the narrator also narrates that:

A large fire had been built outside the village. I did not know who had made fire; I could not see anyone nearby. Grandma and I stopped in front of it. I had not spoken at all. Grandma bent down to the birth bag and pulled out Emete's afterbirth. She opened the cloth. The afterbirth I had seen before did not smell of anything. But this afterbirth smelled rotten. Infected. Grandma threw it onto the fire and watched the flames, which it jumped up suddenly and then fell back. (187)

The above incidence of large fire, also clearly portrays the locals' eco-ignorance of the severity of the consequences of cutting down of trees for unnecessary large fire burning. This act of 'deforestation' and forest damage by the locals also intensifies climate issues. Grandma's disposition of polluting the air by throwing rotten and infected afterbirth in the burning fire also shows her eco-ignorance of the negative impact her action. The practice of burning of rotten

afterbirth by Grandma equally has the tendency of posing public health risk. Indeed, it is this lack of deep understanding of human-nonhuman intricate relationship that leads to the present environmental threats in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

The three key concern in Watson's novel are the continued unabated pollution, lack of environmental safety guards and eco-ignorance, leading to the current damage to our planet Earth. This is a stark warning against our blind and unbridled materialist pursuit of "development and progress". It is also apparent that the "Earth" is the only thing that both humans and nonhumans have in common as such, we cannot continue to fold our arms and watch our life support (planet-earth) been destroyed for the sake of our eco-ignorance, greed and scientific discovery. This underscores our deep understanding of the impacts of anthropocentric mentality and responsibility to preserve the planet for the future generations. For those skeptical and feeling that literary deep concern about climate issues is just a hoax, may need to understand eco-critics views and Niyi Osundare's position about this, when he asserts that, "we didn't inherit this Earth from our ancestors; we borrowed it from our children..." To this end, any attempt to downplay the 'call for behavioural change towards the protection of the environment by eco-writers, then our future generations may have to contend with the severe domino effects of the present humans' activities leading to environmental issues.

## Recommendations

Having explored the catastrophic consequences of human-driven environmental threats in Watson's novel, it is apparent that for the planet Earth system to remain a human safe haven, deliberate steps must be taken to mitigate the ongoing anti-ecological activities that pose threats the nation's planet earth and future generations. The study therefore, recommends that:

- i. there is need for meaningful engagement and re-orientation of people across the country on their unwholesome activities and their negative impact on human and non-human. This will help to foster their deeper understanding of the consequences of human action as well as create eco-awareness that promotes the adaption of sustainable practices in the country.
- ii. the volatility of the setting of the novel is due to the gross unethical practices and flagrant disregard for environment by the multinational oil companies in the oil-producing region and other parts of the country as well as the laxity of government regulatory agencies and the locals' eco-ignorance and complacency. Nigeria's environmental regulatory agencies, therefore need to be patriotic and redouble their efforts towards stricter implementation of regulations to protect the environment.
- iii. there is need for the present government to go on extensive 'green campaigns and commitment on the growing need for to reduce the over reliance on fossil fuels, emissions and transition to clean green/cleaner energy. Thus, the present administration needs to keep to her "Renew-hope promises" by showing commitment in all her policy frameworks on renewable energy sectors in order to attain sustainable practices and conversation efforts.
- iv. there is also urgent need for more conferences on issues of ecological threats in Nigeria to advocate for policy changes and implementation, in order to support for legislation that protects habitats and endangered species to contribute to the ongoing global 'green campaigns'. This will help intensify the call for collective non-violent action towards exposing human activities that lead to environmental and climate issues in Nigeria.



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