

REPRESENTATIONS OF OIL COMPANIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE IN CHRISTIE WATSON'S *TINY SUNBIRDS FAR AWAY*

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of Western oil companies and environmental degradation in Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, situating the novel within the broader discourse of environmental degradation and socio-political unrest in the Niger Delta. Through the voice of the young narrator, Blessing, Watson crafts a poignant narrative that unveils the destructive impact of oil exploitation on both the natural environment and the lived realities of local communities. The analysis foregrounds the oil company not merely as an economic actor but as a faceless embodiment of neocolonial exploitation, ecological devastation, and systemic injustice. By highlighting the loss of traditional livelihoods, the rise of militancy, and the deterioration of health and social structures, the novel underscores the deep entanglement between environmental collapse and human suffering. Drawing on eco-critical perspective, this study shows how Watson's work, despite being authored by an outsider, amplifies silenced voices and confronts global complicity in the Niger Delta crisis. Ultimately, the research affirms literature's power to humanize ecological destruction, transforming statistics of oil spills and gas flares into lived experiences of pain, resilience, and resistance.

Keywords: Niger-Delta, oil spill, socio-political unrest, Christie Watson, environmental degradation

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is plagued by severe environmental degradation and social unrest, primarily driven by the activities of multinational oil corporations. Despite being one of the richest areas in terms of natural resources, the region has been subjected to systemic exploitation, resulting in widespread poverty, health crises, and ecological devastation. The negative impact of oil spills and gas flaring of the region has created a complex web of challenges that affect the livelihoods and well-being of local communities. (Egya, 2016, p. 3) *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* 2011 is a text that reflects the acute condition of the Niger-Delta region most especially in the aspect of oil exploitation.

The history of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta has led to a lot of Environmental issues in the region. In the year 1956 in Oloibiri where the first oil well was discovered in Bayelsa and after

this discovery over 1481 oil wells were also discovered producing 159 oil fields (Eregba and Irughe, 2009). The uncovering of oil in commercial quantities in the Niger-Delta region at the beginning held good prospects for a region that was at the edge changing in terms of human and structural development both in the region and in the entire nation's political economy (Akpan and Amamkpa, n.d.). The expectations of the members of the Niger Delta region were high due to the discovery of oil and also the emergence of oil companies which they thought will be of great help in the development of the region and also the in elevating Nigeria from the economic situation it was, but to the surprise of the members of the region the boom soon gave way to doom the environment became polluted through oil spills and gas flares. The oil companies adopted drilling methods that defies the template of global best practices and are detrimental to the not only the

environment but the health of the people (160). As government oversight proved inadequate, public frustration grew. Over time, the crisis evolved from ethnic conflicts such as the Ijaw-Itsekiri clashes, to demands for environmental restoration and resource control, and eventually to militancy, pipeline vandalism, kidnapping, and hostage-taking. By the close of the amnesty period in October, more than 20,000 militants had surrendered their weapons (Oluwasanmi 2023).

The literary world has responded to these crises by highlighting the plight of the Niger Delta in fiction, poetry, and drama. Writers such as Tanure Ojaide (*The Activist*), Kaine Agary (*Yellow Yellow*), and Helon Habila (*Oil on Water*) have addressed themes of ecological devastation, social injustice, and neocolonial exploitation. Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* contributes to this discourse by portraying the lived experiences of communities affected by oil extraction through the voice of a young narrator. However, while previous studies have examined the novel's treatment of family dynamics, political unrest, and ecofeminism, insufficient scholarly attention has been paid to how Watson specifically represents Western oil companies as agents of environmental collapse and socio-economic dislocation in the Niger Delta. This study addresses that gap by using an eco-critical framework to analyse how *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* critiques corporate power, ecological degradation, and their human consequences.

Literature Review

In the area of Oil Spillage and Environmental Degradation there are certain scholarly perspectives on it. Oil spill is one of the major issues associated with environmental degradation. Oil Spillage is the release of a liquid petroleum hydrocarbon into the environment due to human activities and is a form of pollution. The most pervasive and major cause of environmental degradation to date is petroleum exploration and ancillary problems of spillage (Jike 2004). Adelana and Adeosun 2011 are of the opinion that the major sources of oil spillage in the Niger Delta are; Vandalisation of the oil pipelines by residents of the community, ageing of the pipelines, oil blowing out of the flow station, cleaning of oil

tankers and disposing of used oil into the drain by road side mechanics (834). Bashir (2021) also confirm in their work that blow outs, vandalism, equipment malfunction, corrosion, accidental and deliberate releases and some other natural causes are the common causes of oil spillage (63). Oil spillage has lot of negative impact on people and their environment. More especially, productive farmlands have been lost due to oil exploration. Sometimes ancestral homes are converted and have been desecrated and converted(Jike 689). Despite the benefits of oil exploration, there are negative impacts such as spillages in oil industries located primarily in the Niger Delta region which has caused massive destructions of farm lands, sources of drinking water, mangrove forest, fishing grounds, and declination of fish, crabs, mollusk, periwinkles and birds(Ozogu et al., 2023). Oil exploration has been widely documented as a significant cause of water pollution, affecting marine and freshwater ecosystems. The contamination arises from various activities, including drilling, transportation, and accidental spills, leading to severe environmental and socio-economic consequences. Oil exploration contaminates surface and groundwater through the discharge of toxic effluents and spills (Nwilo and Badejo, 2005).

Gas flaring and air pollution most especially caused during oil exploration is a major theme that have called for concern by many researchers. Nigerian gas flaring emits as many greenhouse gases as 18million metric tons and release toxic substances in the areas damaging both the environment and the health of the people (Ubani and Onyejekwe, 2013). Scholars argue that gas flaring is a major contributor to atmospheric pollution by releasing harmful substances in the air (Nwankwo and Ogsgarue 78). These pollutants not only contribute to global climate change but also create hazardous living conditions for local populations. Research indicates that the Niger-Delta is home to 150 gas flaring sites, making Nigeria one of the highest emitters of greenhouse gases in Africa (Obi 2011). Emission of harmful gases leading to respiratory problems and acid rain. Heavy metals and hydrocarbons from flaring

affect soil quality and water sources. Increased rates of respiratory diseases and other health issues linked to flaring emissions

The health implications of oil related activities are particularly severe which is a major subject matter in many researches works. Research by Olujimi et al (2011). reveals alarming health implications for local populations, with increased rates of respiratory infections and cancers linked to environmental pollution from oil activities (117). The correlation between exposure to oil pollutants and health issues is further supported by studies demonstrating elevated levels of toxic substances in the environment, leading to chronic health conditions among residents (Nwankwo 2019). Dzezemoon and Ferro highlight specifically that communities that surround oil drilling sites are at higher risk of respiratory illness due to the harmful toxins released in the air during gas flaring and drilling operations (n.d. 671). Furthermore, the psychological impacts of living in an environmentally degraded area cannot be overlooked. Residents report high levels of anxiety and stress related to the uncertainty of their health and livelihoods, compounded by the lack of effective governmental response to their plight. (Bodo et al., 2020).

Critical Perspectives on Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*

Several scholars have examined Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* from various thematic and theoretical perspectives. Alansary, (2023) in "Empowering Nature and Women: Ecofeminist Analysis of Atwood's *The Edible Women* and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*" which investigates the interconnectedness of how the environment and women are treated. It delves deeper to investigate the interconnectedness between the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment (41). While Elizabeth (2020) offers a similar eco-feminist reading in their study titled "An Ecofeminist Reading of Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*" that there is an interconnection between the way women are treated and also the environment which they find themselves is treated. The work goes further to investigate the new identity and transfer which

give rise to new identity and equally the female strength in the midst of trouble as they are directly and indirectly by ecological crisis through ecofeminism(214.)

Other scholars have taken different approaches to the novel. Asika (2024), in the study titled "The other side of a Polluted Coin: White Expatriates in Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*" investigates the portrayal of white expatriates in Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*.(80). Olughu in his work "Ecological Degradation and Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*" which focus on the ecological degradation and activism in the two texts therefore advocating for global awareness towards promoting environmental conservation and various means of embracing peace in the fictional devastated Niger-Delta environment. Ogbazi and Opara (2022) tackles the plight of the Niger-Delta environment as reflected through the experiences of the characters in the text and advocates for the recreation and rehabilitation of the Niger-Delta(22). Adequite (2023) explores the interconnectedness between fate and the environment by analyzing how these terms are portrayed in the text and how the characters react to them in "Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* The Dynamic of Environmental Exploration and Ecocriticism", (31).

While this body of scholarship provides valuable insights into the novel's thematic and ideological concerns, much of it does not directly examine how *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* represents oil companies or links their activities to the environmental collapse of the Niger Delta. It is after reviewing these previous studies that the gap becomes evident: existing research has paid greater attention to ecofeminism, identity, and character portrayals, while offering limited sustained analysis of the ways in which Watson's narrative critiques corporate oil practices and exposes their role in the region's ecological devastation.

Theoretical Framework

Eco-criticism

Eco-criticism can be traced to Rachel Carson's best-selling book *Silent Spring*, which

addressed the hazardous effects of pesticides on the environment and paved the way for heightened environmental consciousness. First published in 1962, *Silent Spring* is widely regarded as the catalyst for the eco-critical movement. It inspired scholars to interrogate literary works through an eco-critical lens, examining the complex and often reciprocal relationship between humans and their natural environment (Hebbar and Mallya, 2024). Lynn White Jr in his book titled *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* which was published in the year 1967 five years after *Silent Spring* was published, Lynn in his book is of the opinion that certain religious perspectives and doctrines most especially the Western religion are major agents that contributed to an exploitative attitude of man towards his environment, he argues that religion is the root cause of environmental degradation (70). While Joseph Meeker is the first to introduce the concept of literary ecology in his work, which became the foundational idea for the later development of Eco criticism. His work titled *The Comedy of Survival* was published in the year 1972 followed by William Ruekert's essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism* 1978 which marked the hallmark of eco-criticism in the use of literature these seminar texts they both define the practice of eco-criticism as the study of biological themes and relationship which appear in literary works and the application of ecology and ecological concepts in works of literature (Keir and Lewis, 2001) Many Scholars have agreed on the fact that the field promises to make substantive advances towards resolving the current ecological challenges (Keir and Lewis, 2001) The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) was formed in 1992 which is an academic organization which played a fundamental role in developing eco-criticism, this contributed immensely to scholars who were interested in exploring the relationship between literature, culture and the environment (Hebbar and Mallya 2024)

Nature cannot be removed from the world of literature which deals with beauty and power of nature however the concern for ecology and the implication of continuous misuse of environment

poses on humanity (Fenn, 2015). It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that have given rise to a new branch of literary theory namely Eco-criticism, this has brought the attention of many critics and literary scholars on the relationship between literature and geography and drawing mutual study of these two fields (116). Eco-criticism which has evolved in recent years as one of the most versatile interactions in the academic domain of literary and environmental studies. One of the unique features of eco-criticism is that it can be applied to various disciplines.

In the last twenty years eco-criticism has developed from its early incarnation as the relatively under-theorised preserve of nature writing enthusiasts to its current vibrant state as a sophisticated array of earth centered approaches to cultural criticism that mobilise and reframe theories drawn from a range of disciplines. Eco-criticism diversity also extends to engaging with various literary forms such as film, TV, digital environment and music (Marland, 2013). There have been a lot of scholarly publications that address some of the essential questions on what eco-critics read, how they write and what their objectives and methods of analysis are. Ever since the first publication and essays titled *The Eco criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* which was published in 1996 has also prompted other works like *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment* by Micheal Brand et al and also *Writing the Environment: Eco-criticism and Literature* by Richard Kerridge and Neil Semmell published in 1998 however these works answer these questions quite controversial but also reveal the need to formulate ecologically informed critical principles (Oppermann 104). In Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*, eco-criticism is relevant in the way the novel depicts the environmental cost of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. The narrator, Blessing, offers vivid accounts of polluted water, destroyed farmland, dying fish stocks, and blackened skies, all of which paint a portrait of a once-thriving ecosystem now rendered nearly uninhabitable due to oil spills and gas flaring. The ecological collapse is not portrayed in isolation but is intertwined with

human suffering, health crises, poverty, and the disintegration of traditional livelihoods, particularly for fishermen and farmers. Eco-criticism thus helps highlight how environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities, amplifying social injustices. The recurring imagery of a defiled land critiques the complicity of oil corporations and the Nigerian state in sacrificing ecological sustainability for profit.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in literary analysis. It examines *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* by Christie Watson through the lens of eco-criticism to explore the representation of Western oil companies and the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta. The analysis focuses on the novel's narrative strategies, imagery, and character perspectives to uncover how environmental degradation, socio-political unrest, and neocolonial exploitation are depicted. Primary data for this research is drawn from close reading of the novel, paying particular attention to passages that highlight oil exploitation, ecological damage, and their impact on local communities. These textual excerpts are analysed in relation to eco-critical theories, which provide the framework for interpreting the interconnection between human society and the environment and also from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and credible online resources that address Niger Delta literature, environmental degradation, oil politics, and the role of multinational corporations in resource-rich but marginalized regions. This approach combines thematic analysis and contextual interpretation. Thematic analysis identifies recurring motifs such as oil spills, gas flaring, health impacts, and community displacement. Contextual interpretation situates these themes within the historical and socio-political realities of the Niger Delta, drawing on existing scholarship to bridge the gap between literary representation and real-world environmental issues. This dual approach ensures that the study not only interprets the text as a work of art but also situates it within broader discourses of environmental justice and postcolonial critique.

Textual Analysis

Representation of Western Oil Companies in *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*

In *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, Christie Watson constructs a compelling narrative that critiques the environmental and socio-economic devastation caused by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. At the heart of this devastation lie Western Oil Companies, a fictional multinational corporation that serves as the novel's symbolic representation of foreign imperialism, environmental injustice, and corporate greed. Through the lens of the young narrator, Blessing, and the experiences of her family and community, Watson portrays western oil company not as a mere company, but as an impersonal and destructive force that disrupts every aspect of local life. The western oil company represents neocolonial exploitation, echoing the legacy of colonial powers who extracted resources from Africa with no concern for the indigenous population. Blessing's remark that the company name "sounded like a king had decided he owned all the oil and we were his slaves" clearly underscores the power imbalance between the foreign corporation and the impoverished local community. This description is particularly poignant because it draws a direct link between modern corporate domination and historical colonial subjugation.

Watson does not directly personify the officials of the oil company instead, the company operates as a faceless and omnipresent entity, reflecting its enormous power and lack of accountability. Its presence is felt through the poisoned air, oil-covered land, dead rivers, and deteriorating health of the people. Oil company's activities lead to widespread environmental degradation, with oil spills polluting the land and waterways, making fishing and farming—traditional sources of livelihood impossible. Blessing observes, "The air smelt of burning. The ground was sticky and black. We used to have a river. Now we have oil." These visceral images foreground the physical violence of environmental destruction, inflicted silently yet continuously by the company's operations. The corporation's devastation is compounded by the complicity of

the Nigerian government, which is portrayed as corrupt and protective of foreign interests at the expense of its citizens. Whenever the community attempts to protest or demand compensation, they are met not with justice, but with military suppression and indifference. Blessing narrates, "Nobody listened. The oil company had soldiers. The government had oil money. We had nothing." Here, Watson powerfully captures the helplessness and voicelessness of marginalized communities facing both external exploitation and internal betrayal. Western oil company, therefore, is not only an agent of ecological disaster but also a symbol of systemic oppression in which both global and local powers are deeply entrenched. The social consequences of Western Oil Company's presence are deeply personal and far-reaching. The community Blessing returns to is one where families are fractured, children are sick from pollution, and young men like Ezekiel are increasingly drawn into militancy as a form of desperate resistance. Western Oil Company is the unseen antagonist whose actions push individuals towards radicalization and whose silence erodes communal ties. Ironically, while the company promises development and progress, the reality is a deepening of poverty and suffering. "The white men wore clean boots and white helmets. We wore rags and coughed black," Blessing observes drawing a stark contrast between the insulated comfort of the exploiters and the unrelenting misery of the exploited.

In sum the Western oil company in *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* serves as a powerful allegory for multinational oil companies that profit from environmental and human destruction in the Niger Delta. Watson uses the company to illustrate how corporate power, when unchecked, perpetuates ecological ruin, fuels political instability, and deepens social inequality. Through vivid storytelling and the voice of an observant young girl, the novel exposes the imperial character of modern extractive capitalism, reminding readers that environmental degradation in postcolonial societies is not merely a local issue, but a global injustice.

In *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*, Christie Watson presents a poignant narrative that

intertwines environmental degradation with the rise of militancy in the Niger Delta. Through vivid imagery and symbolic language, Watson illustrates how the destruction of the natural environment contributes to a sense of loss, injustice, and eventual resistance among the local people. A passage in the novel, where the protagonist is led to the river by her grandmother, exemplifies the emotional and material consequences of environmental damage and subtly anticipates the conditions that foster militancy.

The water of the Delta is the blood of Nigeria. Grandma led me though twisted red trees and scratchy bushes until we came to the riverbank and I felt the ground underneath my flip-flop soften and cool, as though I suddenly had my slippers back. But we must not drink this. Only in emergencies. The tap water is cleaner. But now, this water is full of oil spills, and salt, so only for washing clothes and bodies. Not for drinking. (35)

The statement, "*The water of the Delta is the blood of Nigeria*," immediately invokes a powerful metaphor. Here, water represents life and sustenance, not just for the people of the Delta but for the entire nation. This metaphor underscores the region's centrality in Nigeria's economic engine, given its vast oil reserves. However, this lifeblood has been poisoned both literally and symbolically. The narrator is warned not to drink from the river, as it is now contaminated by oil spills and salt. What once sustained life has become a source of illness and danger. This shift signals the profound ecological damage wrought by oil exploration and the consequent rupture of traditional ways of life.

An older boy in my class told me. They did not get the job they wanted so the government makes them teach. That is why they hate the children. (60)

In *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*, Christie Watson reveals how environmental degradation is not an isolated issue but part of a larger network of systemic failures including education, governance, and employment. The above quote, seemingly a minor reflection from a schoolchild, offers

profound insight into how state neglect shapes not just the landscape, but also the psyche of the nation's youth and the disillusionment of adults. It becomes a quiet but poignant commentary on the frustration, forced choices, and lack of opportunity that breed both resentment and, eventually, militancy at the surface, the quote describes a student's interpretation of their teachers' bitterness.

However, this sentiment reveals a deeper social discontent: trained professionals are unable to find employment in their desired fields, leading to resentment that is then projected onto the children they are made to teach. This frustration is not merely personal it is political. The suggestion that "the government makes them teach" frames teaching as a punishment for failure, not as a vocation. It reflects a society where employment is disconnected from passion and skill, a condition frequently found in regions experiencing economic collapse due to environmental degradation and poor governance. This quote also illustrates the psychological and emotional effects of such systemic breakdowns. Teachers, who are meant to nurture and guide, become antagonistic figures. Their bitterness is understood even by children, implying that disappointment and disillusionment are socially transmitted from adults to youth. Such conditions create a community climate where hope is scarce, and pathways to success are limited. This atmosphere becomes fertile ground for militancy, which often offers a more direct route to power, respect, or rebellion than formal institutions do. In the context of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, where oil pollution has stripped people of traditional jobs like fishing and farming, the collapse of other state functions like education amplifies a sense of abandonment. Militants, in this setting, may present themselves as alternative leaders or providers, especially when the state fails to deliver on basic promises. Just as teachers are pushed into roles they did not choose; young people are pushed into militancy by a lack of alternatives.

I saw a flame we neared Warri, the sky
look angry. Pipeline fires, said Zafi.
They are burning the gases from the

oil. He started coughing again (19).

The first image the reader confronts here is elemental: a flame, and an angry sky. These are not natural fires, but pipeline fires gas flares the result of oil companies burning off excess natural gas during the extraction process. This practice, long criticized by environmentalists, has been linked to severe air pollution, acid rain, and respiratory illnesses. In the novel, Zafi's coughing is not incidental; it's symptomatic of a deeper problem. His body becomes a canvas of suffering, marked by an industry that has rendered the air toxic. The phrase "the sky looked angry" is metaphorical and powerful. It anthropomorphizes nature, suggesting that the land itself is reacting furious, perhaps, at the destruction being wrought upon it. This is not merely literary flair; it's a commentary on how environmental degradation disrupts both natural balance and emotional landscapes. The sky, a universal symbol of vastness and calm, becomes a site of foreboding and rage mirroring the inner turmoil of communities who are ignored, exploited, and left to breathe poison.

The location Warri is significant as well. Warri is one of the epicenters of oil extraction in Nigeria, and its mention signals entry into a zone of ecological and political crisis. Gas flaring is a visual marker of this crisis constant, burning reminders that the land is being used, but not for the benefit of its people. These environmental conditions cripple livelihoods such as farming and fishing, pushing young people to seek survival elsewhere sometimes through militant groups that promise power, retribution, or economic gain. The presence of fire, too, is symbolically double-edged. It represents both destruction and potential resistance. Just as gas flares burn endlessly for corporate profit, militants have been known to set pipelines ablaze as acts of protest. Watson's imagery thus reflects the dual nature of fire in the Delta: one imposed by exploitation, the other ignited in rebellion. Both consume, both destroy—but one is sanctioned and normalized, while the other is criminalized and condemned.

Importantly, Watson does not romanticise militancy. Instead, she shows that it emerges from deep systemic failures. Zafi's coughing and the narrator's unease are reminders that the region's

problems are not merely political but existential. People are quite literally dying slowly breathing in destruction, day after day. Under such conditions, militancy may appear not as an act of aggression, but of reclamation and desperation. The pipeline fires are not just an environmental issue; they are a political and historical symptom of colonial and neocolonial exploitation. The Niger Delta is rich in oil a resource that has brought wealth to foreign companies and Nigerian elites but left local communities impoverished, displaced, and sick. The fact that Zafi is merely an onlooker, coughing helplessly as the sky burns, reflects the disempowerment of indigenous populations under extractive regimes. The land's resources are being plundered not for the benefit of local people, but for external profit a classic postcolonial dynamic where the wealth of the land serves global capitalist networks while local environments are sacrificed. The "angry" sky can also be read symbolically: nature itself bears witness to the violence of extraction and resists through metaphorical rage. Postcolonial theorists often emphasize how colonialism disrupts not only human societies but the landscapes and ecologies those societies depend on. Here, the pipeline fires are a direct continuation of colonial-era extraction systems, where imperial powers now replaced by multinational corporations exploit African resources with little regard for environmental or human costs.

Environmental Degradation and Health Challenges

Tiny Sunbirds Far Away reveals how Environmental Degradation and oil exploration is detrimental to the health which is seen in

Give us respiratory diseases, cancers,
make our women suffer miscarriage,
and make our children deformed!
Some of the stories I hear from my own
sister who is an assistant Birth
Attendant, prove that the air is
poisoning our women (202).

This moment in the novel is a powerful indictment of oil exploitation and the systemic neglect of those who live with its consequences. The speaker's tone is furious, almost accusatory a cry of anguish against the corporations and complicit

state actors responsible for the environmental crisis. The list of afflictions *respiratory diseases, cancers, miscarriages, deformities* is not only a catalogue of suffering but a testament to how pollution infiltrates the most intimate aspects of life, from breathing to childbirth. The reference to an assistant Birth Attendant as a source of these stories lends credibility and situates the critique within local knowledge systems. These are not abstract health statistics they are the lived experiences of women in the creeks and villages, recounted through the eyes of midwives who witness the physical fallout of ecological damage. This ground the narrative in maternal suffering, exposing how environmental degradation is a deeply gendered issue. Women, particularly those who are pregnant or nursing, bear the brunt of polluted air, contaminated water, and toxic soil.

The term "poisoning our women" carries powerful implications. It frames environmental damage as a deliberate, almost genocidal act, as if the air itself has been weaponised. This language transforms environmental degradation into a form of slow violence. Unlike explosions or mass shootings, slow violence is incremental, often invisible, yet cumulatively catastrophic like the air that kills softly, quietly, without the spectacle of a battlefield. But the rage it produces is no less real. These experiences of suffering and injustice are precisely the emotional and psychological fuel that leads some communities and individuals to militancy. While the speaker here is not a militant, the tone of righteous anger and moral clarity is often found in the rhetoric of those who take up arms. The failure of the government and oil companies to address basic health concerns becomes evidence of abandonment, and militancy begins to feel like the only language of redress. Importantly, this passage also shows that militancy is not just about land or oil it's about life itself. When pollution causes miscarriages and deformities, it is quite literally an assault on the future. Communities are not only fighting for resources they are fighting for the right to exist, to reproduce, to live free of fear and poison. This adds a deeper layer to the narrative of resistance in the novel, showing that ecological exploitation is also bio political control, a war against the bodies

of the poor.

The smell of diesel was so thick that
I could taste it. A pipeline fire lit up
the sky; it was as if the sun had risen
at midnight. Tiny bits of black ash
settled on my hair, made me cough.
(139)

The thick smell of diesel that can be “tasted” signals that pollution is not just an external problem it invades the body, entering through the senses, lungs, and skin. The pipeline fire represents the destructive practices of oil extraction, where gas flaring and spills release toxic materials into the air, water, and soil. The coughing caused by “black ash” falling from the sky illustrates the direct health impact: respiratory illness, skin irritation, and long-term diseases like asthma, cancer, or even developmental problems in children. Eco-criticism draws attention to this slow violence, where environmental damage unfolds over time, invisibly accumulating harm on the most vulnerable populations. In this reading, the Delta is not just polluted it has become unlivable, with nature transformed into an agent of sickness. The pipeline fire is not merely an industrial accident or a local problem it is the result of a neocolonial system where foreign oil companies, in collusion with the Nigerian state, extract resources without regard for the local population. The people who live in these communities, like the narrator, bear the consequences of a global economy structured by the colonial past: the wealth of the land enriches outsiders while leaving local communities impoverished, sick, and voiceless. The unnatural image of the sun rising at midnight suggests a world turned upside down by extractive capitalism, where the rhythms of nature (day, night, clean air) are broken by corporate greed.

Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of Western oil companies in Christie Watson’s *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* through an eco-critical lens, revealing how the novel foregrounds the destructive impact of oil exploitation on both the environment and the lives of Niger Delta communities. The analysis shows that Watson portrays Western oil companies not as

neutral economic actors but as faceless forces of neocolonial exploitation, ecological devastation, and systemic injustice. Through Blessing’s narrative voice, the novel highlights the loss of traditional livelihoods, the poisoning of land and water, and the human suffering caused by oil spills, gas flaring, and governmental complicity. In doing so, the text transforms abstract statistics about environmental damage into lived experiences of pain, resilience, and resistance. The eco-critical framework has been central to this study, allowing for an exploration of how environmental degradation intersects with social and political realities in postcolonial spaces. By situating Watson’s work within broader discourses on literature and ecology, this research underscores literature’s power to illuminate global complicity in local crises. The recurring imagery of polluted rivers, blackened skies, and sickened bodies reflects how ecological harm is never isolated from human consequences. This reinforces the importance of reading Niger Delta narratives not only as political commentaries but as urgent calls for environmental justice that link nature’s destruction to the exploitation of marginalized people.

Beyond offering a fresh interpretation of *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, this work contributes to knowledge by filling a gap in scholarship on Watson’s novel. While prior studies have examined its themes of family, politics, or ecofeminism, few have specifically analyzed how Western oil companies are depicted as agents of ecological collapse and systemic oppression. By applying an eco-critical approach, this study demonstrates how literature can expose the intersection of environmental and social crises in ways that empirical reports alone cannot. It affirms that Watson’s narrative, though authored by an outsider, amplifies silenced voices in the Niger Delta and challenges readers to confront the global dimensions of ecological injustice. This contribution deepens existing literary discourse on the Niger Delta by showing how fictional representations can shape our understanding of environmental exploitation, neocolonial power, and the human cost of resource extraction.

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