

(Re)-Thinking Ecological Vulnerability: Expatriates In Watson's Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away

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Abstract

This study investigates the portrayal of expatriates vis-à-vis environmental exploitation and ecological vulnerability of the Niger Delta region in Christie Watson's Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away. Watson, a British writer in her novel, Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away, delves into the of retelling the Niger Delta travails from the lenses of an outsider patriotic and brave enough to tell her side of the disheartening oil exploitation story. The images of white expatriates in Nigerian literature vis-à-vis Niger Delta concerns are almost stereotyped. These expatriate oil workers are recreated as predators that laid siege over the entire region feeding on the impoverished and vulnerable Niger Delta women. These expatriates, aware of the poverty in the region, prey on the Niger Delta girls who are seeking nothing but love, comfort, survival, and some sense of humanity. Against this backdrop, the study argues that Watson reconstructs the images of the white expatriates in a bid to challenge stereotypes. With the character of Dan, who is everything the male Niger Deltans undoubtedly are not, the paper surmises that Watson succeeds in presenting another side of the expatriate story which begs for further studies and insights regarding the activities of the white expatriates and the Niger Delta women amidst oil exploitation, pollution, and devastation.

Keywords: *Expatriates, vulnerability, pollution, exploitation, stereotype, Niger Delta, women*

INTRODUCTION

Born in 1976, Christie Watson, a professor of medical and health humanities is the patron of the Royal College of Nursing Foundation. Watson lives in London and writes full-time. Her major writings include Tiny Sunbirds Far Away, Where Women are Kings, Here I Stand, The Language of Kindness: A Nurse's Story. Her first novel, Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away won the Costa First Novel Award and her second novel, Where Women Are Kings was also published to international critical acclaim. Her works have been translated into twenty-two languages.

Tiny Sunbirds Far Away is one of the coming-of-age stories on the Niger Delta travails set in Lagos and the Niger Delta, which takes us on an emotional, psychological, socio-cultural as well as religious, economic, and political journey around the Niger Delta region in the miasma of oil exploitation and exploration. Describing the Niger Delta the writer praises thus: "The Niger Delta known as "the Big Heart" is home to proud people with good reason. It is a beautiful land with extraordinary wildlife, an amazing landscape, bustling cosmopolitan towns, and peaceful villages. Port Harcourt and Warri are fast becoming centers of cultural importance, with thriving arts and literature scenes, an abundance of restaurants, and independent theater groups. The Niger Delta is a place of laughter, music, and diversity. But the majority of people who live in the Niger Delta survive on less than one dollar a day. They enjoy none of the enormous wealth generated by the oil-rich land. Many people in the Niger Delta have no access to schools, health care, or clean water. They live with the effect of environmental devastation caused by the continued gas flaring and frequent ecological accidents, which have amounted to more than one and a half million tons of spilled oil: starvation, asthma, chest infections, cancers, and birth deformities. They live with the threat of violence, rape, and death.

Though Christie Watson is not from the Niger Delta region, her compassion for the Niger Delta Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away, a novel that chronicles the problems of the region from a multi-faceted dimension

and told with such a charm, humour, and ease possessed by only genuine and talented writers. It is a sad irony that the oil in Niger Delta became a destructive force and inevitably metamorphosed the Niger Deltans and their environment into sacrificial lambs. The pollution, impoverishment, spillage, killing, chaos, brutality, oppression, molestation, exploitation, denial, rape, and abuse of the Niger Delta region are realities that Watson chronicles in her novel under study.

Stereotyping Expatriates in Niger-Delta Eco-literature

The images of white expatriates in African literature have not always been a favourable one. Available evidence and critical works overtime support a popular opinion that these expatriates are more destructive and evil than any positive impact and blessing they may provide to the host community. Echezona Ifejiroka in his study of these expatriate figures in some selected African plays from different regions of Africa notes that the playwrights depict the expatriates as colonialists, oppressors, imperialists, cannibals, exploiters, slave masters, and dealers (73). Ifejiroka attests that:

The expatriates are depicted as murderers, plunderers and killers who often use menial gifts of medals, gun power, trinkets, bicycles, guns and necklaces as baits to confuse and enslave Africans, particularly their leaders. The white colonialists are able to achieve their destructive objectives based on their superior arms; the types they used against Abame people and other communities in Igbo land. (74)

One of the significant realities of the Niger Delta beyond oil spillage, exploitation, devastation, bastardization, and impoverishment of the region, is the abuse and exploitation of the women by the white oil workers, the expatriates who not only exploit the oil but also sexually exploit the people. The girls and women in Niger Delta are preyed on and destroyed in the same manner as the environment. The girls live in fear of rape, sexual abuse, and harassment. When they are not coping with the problems of pollution, poverty, and devastation, they are struggling to ward off the lustful attacks from the expatriates and oil workers.

The white expatriates in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, one of the Niger Delta literature are lucidly portrayed as chief sources of woe in the Niger Delta region emanating from their exploits, and wantonness which only aggravate the problems of the women in the region. Amidst the madness of pollution and devastation of the region, Ibinaebi, Laye's mother goes to Port Harcourt for survival only to have her future and dreams cut short and thwarted by a Greek sailor, Plato Papadopoulos who exploits her innocence and leaves her with an unwanted pregnancy. Ignatius Chukwumah surmises that Laye is: "... a fruit of a Greek father and an Ijaw mother, a father who absconded without the knowledge of his burgeoning seed in the girl that has warmed his bed throughout his short stay in Port Harcourt" (5).. Ibinaebi who had gone to Port Harcourt for survival, returned with a pregnancy. Laye is to embrace that path of exploitation and her travails are not devoid of the encumbrances of suffer further exploitation by another white expatriate, Sergio. Before Laye leaves her polluted village in search of survival in Port Harcourt, just like her mother before her, she encounters Sergio who she takes to her secret hideout, cooks him a meal, and shares the story of her life with him. She even allows him to kiss her.. Later Laye journeys to Port Harcourt in her quest to survive and escape her polluted and impoverished village. Ibinaebi's encounter with Plato, his sudden disappearance did not only usher physical pain, but deep psychological trauma which thwarted both the dreams of a mother and daughter as Laye's search for her father led her to Sergio, which proved another devastating experience. Chukwumah supports that: "As it turns out, it (Laye's mother's silence) did very little to wear out the mesmerizing power that Papadopoulos's absence exercises over her daughter... Papadopoulos's image of an absent comforting male looms just as large in his absence as if he had been present. In Port Harcourt, the search for her father, once ignited, subconsciously resurfaces during her chance meeting with Sergio" (51). In the city, she meets Sergio again and this time, he exploits her sexually, a relationship that only complicates her life and that of the child she already carries. Aware of the plight of the girl-child in the region, Precious Ona affirms that: "to Agary, the suffering (of the female folk) is in two forms: the women suffer in the hands of the foreign oil expatriate and in the hands of local men who discriminate, subjugate and relegate them to the background" (35). In a similar tangent, Joy Etiowo further confirms the protagonist's character in *Yellow-Yellow* as a "sex object" (137). The critic while interrogating the moral consequences of the situation in the Niger Delta, concludes that the young girls become easy sex prey to the white expatriates. In her words:

The young girls become easy sex preys to the white oil workers and expatriates. *Yellow-Yellow* (the major character) herself is a function of such social malfunctioning, and, unfortunately, later found herself being

also a sex object for self-sustenance. This too, is the story of many young ladies, who, against their inner desires, are forced to subject their bodies to sex exploiters (many of whom are the architects of the economic situation that turned them to such in the first instance). (137)

Agary, in an interview with Geosi Reads reveals the real-life encounter she had at Bonny Island that triggered her narrative in *Yellow-Yellow*. According to Agary:

After resisting the pressure to expand the story for over a year, I finally got the inspiration for the novel, quite unexpectedly, on a trip to visit a friend on Bonny Island in Nigeria; it would be my first time on the Island. At the waterside in Port Harcourt, waiting to get a boat to the Island, I saw a young man, hustling like every other young man at the waterside, but he was different. He was mixed Asian. I had never seen that mix in Port Harcourt before, and certainly not at a waterside. The story became clearer when I got to Bonny and saw the number of Asians working as part of the Joint Venture with the Nigeria LNG in Bonny. Other things I witnessed in Bonny also contributed to the story” (NP).

An encounter with a mixed-race Asian boy hustling for a living along the waterside in Bonny changed everything for Agary. The sight of the mixed-race Asian boy and many Asians working as part of the Joint Venture with the Nigeria LNG in Bonny bared the reality to Agary and proved the inspiration she needed to narrate her Niger-Delta story. These were children fathered by these Asians, who, exploited the poor and impoverished Niger-Delta girls for sexual pleasure. *Yellow-Yellow* lives as a bitter testament of the activities of the white expatriates in Niger Delta beyond the oil theft and exploitation.

Against this backdrop, Waston offers narrative of the Niger Delta women and the white oil expatriates symbolized in the relationship between Dan, a white oil worker, and Timi, the protagonist’s mother which triggered the present study on images of the white expatriate in the novel of Christie Waston.

Sociological Theory: A Theoretical Justification

This study adopts sociological literary theory as theoretical anchor for the study. Sociological theory is concerned with the relevance of literary works to mirroring and engaging societal issues and problems, with the aim of proffering valid solutions to them. The theory is rooted in the idea that literature is a product of the society. It looks at literature from the point of view of social issues and its relevance to society. Sociological theory sees a literary work as nothing but a product of several real aspects of the society of a writer. The experience a writer writes about is the experience of the society. In the views of Kofi Agyekum “Sociological Critics argue strongly that literary works and social context are inseparable. The social milieu is embedded in the works of artists. In effect, it is the social context that serves as the raw material for the production of literary works. The social setups and the institutions in the society at any point in time combine to exert some major influence in the works of the artists. Sociological critics focus on the values of society and how those values are reflected in the literary works. Sociological critic study the economic, political and cultural issues expressed in literary works because they reflect the true picture of what exists in the society. (129) In the opinion of Oguntuase, Adefemi, Obura, Oluoch and Amateshe, Kisa, “literature of any kind is expected to mirror and refract society so that corrections and adjustments can be made to social and communal lives where and when necessary” (54). Abram Anders submits that the work of art is to be situated as a response to a situation that is essentially social; literature serves a therapeutic role in so far as it diagnoses and dissolves maladaptive social categories and orientations (20). Affirming the validity of the theory to the present study, Oguntuase, Adefemi, Obura, Oluoch and Amateshe, Kisa, conclude that “protest literature, the kind in which Tanure Ojaide engages, is intended to react to real socio-political and economic issues confronting society. This sort of literature goes a notch higher by proffering solutions to the problems identified, thus serving a therapeutic role. (54). The theory, therefore, is concerned with the way and manner the writer responded to the social issues around him at whatever point in the history of society he writes about. This approach shares a lot in common with the Marxist theory of Karl Marx and Engels though there are peculiar core areas of concentration in the two approaches. The theory is valid in our interrogation of protest and hope in Ojaide’s poetry, *The Endless Song*.

(Re)writing Expatriates in Waston’s *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*

Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away, is weaved around the girl-child protagonist, Blessing, an Ijaw girl with a Yoruba father. Raised in Lagos by her mother, Timi, alongside her asthmatic brother, Ezekiel, two years older, a marital dispute from their parents forces them to break away from the life of affluence their father had offered to poverty and pollution in their mother’s homeland in the heart of the Niger Delta region. Through the unblinking eyes of the twelve years old Blessing, we encounter the myriads of psychological, traumatic, and emotional problems resulting from pollution, impoverishment, and

devastation of the region, most especially the female folk. Life in the village contrasts with the affluence Blessing has grown to know in her twelve years of existence in Lagos. The food is different as everything else smacks of poverty. Blessing laments: "...the food tasted strange and my fingers full of parasites, but I felt as though I could not leave any at all. My stomach was angry. I could not stop thinking of the dirt on my hands, the lack of soap, and the pounded yam that did not taste at all like pounded yam..." (16). Back to Ijaw, Timi and her two children settled in a room that contained nothing but one mattress without a sheet. Describing the room, Blessing recognizes the absence of a pillow, blanket, and mosquito net. Even the tall fan that stood against the wall had not seen electricity for months and Alhaji could not afford a generator. That same morning, on a tour to the village, Blessing encounters pollution in its depth. The smell of the water first greeted her before she saw the river already rendered inactive by pollution. In sharp contrast, at the other side of the region, the oil workers thrive in good life free of rot, pollution a life of affluence supported by the resources of the exploited natives. This Timi experiences after she manages to secure a job in the Highlife Bar where she attends to white expatriates and oil workers: "...from the table we were sitting at I could see a troop of monkeys travel across the trees. It's like a national park. Honestly, I can't believe that the other side of the wall is another world. One minute you're in the oily swamp, the next, five-star luxury. Cool, air-conditioned, five-star luxury." (61) She hopes that her children will get a chance to visit her workplace someday to: "see civilization during the day" (62). The meager salary she earns as a bar attendant proves insufficient to cater to the growing needs in her family. Ezekiel and Blessing had to stop school until she is able to save up their school fees. As she is unable to find the money in time, Blessing drops out of school, and before Timi could raise the money to send her back, she becomes a birth assistant under her grandmother, a role that was later to redefine her and decided her future in the village.

Christie Watson in *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*, draws attention to the reality of the female folk in the Niger Delta region. Due to the poverty in the region, the expatriates see the women as mere sex objects to quench the insatiable sexual appetite, and cope with the pressure of work. These women are abused, played on, and dumped at will. In her bid to survive, Timi's entangles in an affair with a white expatriate, Dan, whom she had met in the Highlife Bar. She hopes in one hand to find love and on the other, to exploit his resources to fend for her children. What started like mere friendship, veered into a supposedly romantic relationship. Blessing describes him: "Dan was surely the whitest man in the world. I could see through the skin of his arms. His veins were the color of the hottest part of a flame. They branched down his hands and forearms, which were poking out from his short-sleeve shirt... I noticed he had no hair on his chest. Even Ezekiel has three chest hairs" (166). Timi's relationship with Dan suddenly means the family and Timi could afford to pay Blessing's school fees although the money came too late after Blessing had already abandoned school in favour of her apprentice job as a birth attendant. Timi's relationship with Dan means the family can now afford generator, good food, and money. But Ezekiel, as if fully aware of the implication and the foreseeable end of Dan's relationship with his mother, and the unwanted presence of the expatriates in the region, refused to reconcile to the affair. Ezekiel laments: "I wish he was purple. I've never seen anybody that white. He looks like a ghost. Of all the men Mama could have' - he paused- 'she chose a white man to be her boyfriend'" (187). Even Grandma views Dan with suspicion. After she saw Timi and Dan kissing under the almond tree in their compound, all she could mutter is: "Big trouble," repeatedly. "Wahala, wahala, wahala" (171). Owing to the common experiences with the white expatriates and the Niger Delta women, it is easy for Grandma and the rest of the household, including Alhaji to be pessimistic regarding the affair. Ezekiel rebels against Dan the first day he visits and gives him chocolate:

"You give me chocolate bar? A chocolate bar? Offer to help me find a school, well, instead of that, I'd prefer my country back, please... 'You people come here'-Ezekiel slammed his fist onto the tabletop, making us all jump- 'and take our women'-he looked at Mama-'and our money. And our jobs.' You pay people to kill us, and you rape our land, then our women! And you give me chocolate bar?" (203)

Despite the pressures from Ezekiel, Dan hold on to Timi. He continues to visit and provide the needed assistance to the family even when his life becomes increasing at risk with threats of kidnapping and gruesome murder by the different militant groups springing up daily in the region, the likes of Sibeye Boys whom Ezekiel later identifies with. Every opportunity Dan had, he utilizes it to show love to Timi's family. Once Celestine, Alhaji's second wife, made love advances to Dan. He resists the advances and ensured the fuss it created was well managed in the family. While Timi's family gradually begins to accept him as part of their family, Ezekiel intensifies his resistance against him. Dan offers to find him a new

school and carter for his expenses, after he failed his exams and the teacher asked him to dropout, but Ezikiel blatantly rejects his offer even as his hopes of becoming a medical doctor turns into a mirage. He attacks down at every opportunity to so, yet, Dan endures it all for the sake of his love for Timi. Blessing captures one of the moments thus:

I watched Dan for signs of fear or anger, but all I saw was the smile fixed on his lips. It looked as if Mama had painted it there with her tiny paintbrush. His eyes smiled. I had no idea what Dan was thinking, even though I could see his body through his thin skin. 'I came to visit your mother,' said Dan. 'And you.' He stepped forward. I thought he might give Ezikiel a chocolate bar. My legs shook. My heart fluttered again between beats. It was worse than the chocolate bar. Dan tried to hug Ezikiel. Ezikiel pushed Dan so far backward that he nearly fell into the doorway. He walked back out, hands up, and smiled again. (208)

Ezikiel, undeterred and unappeased, stands his ground and defends his actions: 'Because he deserves it.' Ezikiel pushed Dan again, harder, and Dan slid across the floor, almost losing his balance. 'Do you know what kind of man he is?' Ezikiel was screaming then..." (209). Further in the narrative, following Dan's engagement with Timi, Ezikiel continues to curse Dan: "White gold? That is what you are! That is what they call the oyibos around here! You people take our black gold and we take you. What do you know about our past? Ezikiel stood up, 'Of course our present?' He was shouting then, with a man's voice. "And what do you know of our future?" (246). It is clear that Ezikiel's anger is not only because of Dan's relationship with his mother and their proposed marriage but because of the presence of the likes of him in the region, exploiting their oil, their women, and their land leaving them with nothing but poverty and pollution. Grandma too voices her innermost feeling on the intended marriage thus: "...oil and water do not mix! You are made of water, you are a part of the Delta, and the river runs through you. That man'-Grandma pointed to Dan-'is made of oil!" (247). However, Dan maintains that he is different and worthy of Timi's hand in marriage. It is real love after all. Dan stands out among the expatriates in the region who are insensitive, exploitative, inhumane, and unfeeling bunches of white expatriates. Dan, like a lone star, shines in the hearts of Timi's family. Alhaji realizes from encounters that Dan is a different brand of a white expatriate- kind, compassionate, humane, and sensitive. He is not insensitive to the plight of Niger Deltans and wishes things were different for them. He shares Alhaji's sentiment on their presence in the region and wishes he could alter things for the people. It did not take much persuasion to have his consent to the wedding.

After the church wedding, the couple, against security advice, returns to Alhaji's compound for the reception. Ezikiel keeps his threat the moment the Sibeye boys arrived and kidnaped Dan on his wedding day. It took Grandma's activism after she led Blessing and other women to protest naked in front of Western Oil Company to shame the Sibeye Boys to release Dan. Ezikiel lost his life after the pipeline he tries to vandalize with the Sibeye Boys caught fire and burned over twenty boys. He died days after the fire and was buried in the compound. Irrespective of Ezikiel's death and other sad events that followed, Dan wins the hearts of Timi's family which demonstrates when she led the women to protest naked in front of the gate of Western Oil Company: "We want Dan freed! We are singing for the deaths that will continue to happen unless we are listened to" (302). The love for Dan is fully captured in the dance between Celestine, Blessing, and other women while protesting naked at the gate of Western Oil Company. Blessing recounts:

...I have never seen Celestine dance like that. Her body was water. She looked small and moved easily. It was a complete surprise. I could hear music despite there being none. I could see, from her movements the pain of losing Ezikiel, of losing Dan, of becoming the second wife of Alhaji. Her body spoke to everyone that day....Her dance was infectious. We were all dancing within minutes. It felt good to move freely. I danced out the pain of Ezikiel's death. I danced out my own pain. I danced away Father. I danced for Dan. Dan who was see-through and loved birds. Mama would never find Dan on top of another woman, of that I was sure. She needed him and I needed her. I danced for Dan, and danced and danced. It felt like praying, like flying. (304)

Dan undoubtedly is to Blessing's mother, everything her Father was not, everything even the Niger Delta men will likely not be to the mother. Dan loves Timi and the fear of heartbreak, the cheating that led to her separation from Blessing's father is well dismissed in Blessing's thought. Complementing the twist of Weston's narrative, Dan after his release, against all odds, made his way back to Alhaji's compound to mourn Ezikiel and pledge his lasting love to Timi and her family: "Mama lifted her head for the first time in weeks. She stood suddenly and ran towards the gate... Dan's body swallowed Mama until they were tightly wrapped into one person.... 'Blessing' he said and held his arms out again as if he expected me to

run into them too. I stood still in my mind, but my body ran and hugged him. I had no control over my legs. They were running. Dan hugged me tight; it feels as though he might not ever let me go..." (306). At this juncture, the study surmises that from the confluent flow of Waston's narrative, the writer obviously takes an entirely different dimension on the stereotyped story of the white expatriates and the Niger Delta women. Dan is not the typical white expatriate we encounter, perhaps in the fictional world of Kaine Agary in her *Yellow-Yellow* nor the expatriates in other African fiction. Dan is of a different sort and breed. He is honest and it is clear he has no intention of exploiting Timi. All he has for her is compassion, the same way he feels sorry for the exploitation and pollution of the region. He needs Timi not just for some play objects but to Timi's marriage to him proves the advent of light that lights up the darkness in his heart and lifts the veil of sadness from a failed marriage he previously had. He confesses thus: "It was the happiest day of my life," Dan said. My own family. When I asked Timi if she'd write her own vows, less traditional than the obey me sort, she was, well, sort of perplexed. 'Why would I?' She asked. Oh, the joy I felt. A simple thing, a marriage between a man and a woman. So simple really. So beautiful" (308). It is real love, a symbiotic and selfless love that gives as much as it is willing to take. Blessing confesses this further thus:

Dan cried like I'd never seen a man cry. I wondered how a person's body could contain so much water... I thought of Dan having a wife who did not love him, and a father who left. I thought of all those hurts coming out in his loud, saved-up tears. I realized that all the time I thought Dan was saving Mama, it was saving Dan. (310)

Dan consents to a Muslim wedding against the Christian wedding the couple earlier had. He is unperturbed about the different weddings under the auspices of different religions, if that is the only way he could prove his loyalty and fidelity to the family that has given him so much– the love of his life. He returns to London with Timi after he was granted leave where they certainly will live happily ever after.

CONCLUSION

From a deconstructive perspective, the tiny sunbirds in a very faraway place are symbolic of the Niger Delta women. Waston's title appears to offer symbolic insights that serve a trope and metaphor in her narrative. It suggests that the Niger Delta women are some wild exotic objects to be admired and used for pleasure, which raises questions on Dan vested interest in collecting different species of birds as hobby. Blessing had found the name– tiny sunbirds– in his list of collectibles and that eventually becomes the title of the novel. It is therefore logical to argue that the Niger Delta women appear to the expatriates what the birds are to Dan – pleasurable hobbies to ease boredom while still in the region. There is a sense in which the Niger Delta women, after their sad encounter and abandonment by the expatriates, lives in their memories (the expatriates) as those tiny sunbirds–the Niger Delta women– plucked and tasted in a place very far away– the Niger Delta region, thus, an arguable symbolic implication of the title– *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*. Yet, against this conjectured and stereotyped story of the expatriates, Waston takes entirely a different critical dimension. The reason is not farfetched. Arguably, Waston is a white woman, a British writer who is bent on countering what she probably perceived as a one-sided story between the expatriates and the Niger Delta women. Watson is bent on changing the narrative and proving that the inevitable encounter between the white expatriates and the female folk in Niger Delta could be beautiful, fulfilling, blissful, and romantic capable of a happy ending that is typical of many love stories as it is the case with Dan and Timi in the novel.

Furthermore, from the activism of Grandma and the other women in the novel, the writer speaks directly to our souls. The Ijaw women are not fools and mere sex objects to the capitalist men, oil workers, and white expatriates, and given the right exposure, opportunity, and access to good education, they are bound to succeed and excel. The likes of Timi, Celestine, Blessing, and all the memorable women in Waston's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* communicate to the rest of the world from the chronicles of an eyewitness observer of the Niger Delta brouhaha. Further studies are begging to support and lend credence to this Watson's side of the white expatriates and the Niger Delta women's story.

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