

## MANGLED DREAMS WITH A WOMAN IN A RAPED ENVIRONMENT: AN ECO-CRITICAL STUDY OF KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW*

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### ABSTRACT

*Literature is a social conscious art, it creates the platform for social activism, education and ideological persuasion in any given society and environment. In discharging his creative enterprise, the creative writer, many hold, engages his tools as means against perceived injustices and all forms of social evils in the society. The role of the writer portrays him as one who perceptibly influences the direction of the society. The increasingly worsening regional and global environmental crises assign taxing responsibilities to creative writers who tirelessly expose the inherent dangers of ecological degradations in contemporary times. This article however, evaluates Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow. It studies the adverse effects of ecological degradations on the female character. The article engages the theory of ecocriticism and the ecorritical method of analyzing data. The study shows that the female character is seen as one whose dreams are left unfulfilled in degraded environments.*

**Keywords:** Women, Mangle, Dreams

### INTRODUCTION

The representation and views of women in male dominated environments has given strength to the agitations for the liberation of women and also birth to eco-feminist writings. Female writers around the world have continually shown concern and interest in the plethora of problems confronting women in environments where patriarchal structures oppress and exploit them. The level of ecological devastation in the Niger-Delta region has affected almost everything including the quality of lives of women in the region. Women's chances of survival in hostile and degraded environments have always been an issue that requires urgent attention owing to the threatening spate of environmental degradation and spoliation in the world, especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. According to Norwood, "survival in a hostile natural environment is an ego-gratifying achievement and feeds the achievement-oriented male psyche, enabling men to return to civilization and improve their culture" (329). Norwood's stand above affirms Merchant's view that "both the women's movement and ecology movement are sharply critical of the costs of competition, aggression, and domination arising from the market economy's modus operandi in nature and society" (6). Contributing to the emancipation of women, Nutsukpo believes that, "with the rise of feminism and the women's liberation movement came a favourable projection of women in the west as they began to consciously recognize and fight for

recognition" (88). What the subsumed conditions of women in degraded environments have however done, is to provoke in them, the urge to give vent to the challenges confronting them through the instrumentality of their intellects and pens. What then has literature got to do with ecology or the environment, and how has literature responded to these threatening global ecological situations? These and many more are some of the puzzles this article attempts to resolve as it eco-critically probes the representation of the female character in polluted environments raised by Agary in the novel.

### Conceptual Framework

To properly evaluate the dynamics of global ecological issues raised in the novel, this research engages the theoretical exposition of ecocriticism mainly because of its commitments to its environmentalist philosophy, and partly because of Jelica Tomic's stance that, "ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature" (43). The article depends mainly on the primary source material which is the novel under review while the secondary materials that are used in the section of literature review; give insight to the works of other scholars that are relevant to the study direction. The method of data collection for this article includes the use of libraries, textbooks, journals, essays and other print and electronic materials. The authors adopt the

eco-critical method in the evaluation of the novel. Taking an eco-critical approach or study to a topic means probing beyond primary texts in literature, and it also involves asking deeper questions about perceptions towards the physical environment. An eco-critical examination of primary source involves the interpretation of texts through an eco-critical lens while examining the tropes within the texts.

#### Theoretical Framework

According to Dickson, ecocriticism critical theory “is concerned with matters of environmental neglect especially those with ‘readily identifiable activist dimensions’” (34). Some critics have argued that one of the reasons ecocriticism has continued to flourish is the continued global environmental crises and that what these environmental crises have done is to generate in writers the tendency towards exposing and mediating in the seemingly unprofitable ecological challenges. As a theory, ecocriticism shows how the works of writers concerned about the environment can play a major part in solving real and pressing ecological concerns. Ecocriticism is seen by different scholars as a multidisciplinary field which has one leg on literature and the other on ecology. Ecocriticism is the study of representation of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.

Ecocriticism, according to Glotfelty, “has one foot on literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (xix). Lucidly, Glotfelty paints the picture of the role of literature in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. If ecocriticism takes as its subjects the interconnectedness between nature and culture especially the cultural artifacts of language and literature as Glotfelty posits, it then means that Barry Commoner’s assertion that “Everything is connected to everything else” (xix), is a truism. The term ecocriticism is coined in 1978 by Rueckert in his essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”.

#### Textual Analysis

Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* reveals the predicaments of women in the environmentally degraded Niger Delta region of Nigerian as the activities of oil exploration and exploitation by the multinational companies continue to ravage their homes, farms, rivers, dignity, and virtually every aspect of their lives. It exposes the unrelenting hardship and frustration of the people of Niger Delta women and their struggle for possible survival and escape in a destabilized environment. It tells the repressive story of how multinational companies under the license of the federal government engage in environmentally unfriendly exploitation of oil which has led to the impoverishment of the Niger-Delta region. Unlike Fowler and Kingsolver’s novels studied earlier, *Yellow-Yellow* recounts the regrettable tale of doom in the Niger Delta oil boom as it affects

the people of the region and the morality burden it ruthlessly heaps on the womenfolk in the region. Agary, in *Yellow-Yellow*, shows commitment in the struggle of women’s awareness of the issues surrounding womanhood in degraded environments. *Yellow-Yellow* tells the story of Zilayefa, a biracial teenage girl raised by her mother. Zilayefa’s mother, “Bibi” after failing to realize her own dream as a young woman, does her best to ensure that her daughter does not make the same mistakes she made, and works hard to provide for her daughter with education so she can go to university in order to secure her future. Agary puts it that:

Disillusioned, my mother went back to her village to face her shame of being an unwed mother with nothing but dreams about my future. She would make sure I accomplish what she had not. She had inherited a small piece of land from her family, which she farmed... with the proceeds, she was able to feed us and pay my school fees. She took care of all my needs and even went without sometimes to make sure that I got an education (8).

Agary constructed the image of the women as one whose destinies are linked to the environment as she reflects the contemporary issues of women confronted with ecological challenges. She however presents the women of Niger Delta region as endangered species. With the crude oil overrunning their farms, drowning plants and other little animals, Zilayefa’s dream of accomplishing her mother’s dream for her becomes threatened and she desires to escape from her village. After perishing the idea of going to school, Zilayefa could do anything just to leave the village. Zilayefa posits that, “I was open to all sorts of things. The only option I was unwilling to consider, that tormented my quiet moment the most, was to remain in my village” (39). She states further that, “one day, almost a year after I finished secondary school, I came with my master escape plan from the village” (17). Eventually through the help of pastor Ikechukwu, she moves to Port Harcourt, where she starts a new life and novel experiences. The effects of a degraded environment is the lives of individual women of the Niger Delta region is movingly addressed in the novel.

In her representation of the predicaments of the womenfolk in a degraded environment, Agary recounts in the first page how crude oil overruns Zilayefa’s mother’s farm which serves as the means of their livelihood. “During my second to last year in secondary school, one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village broke and spilled oil over several hectares of land, my mother’s farm included” (3). The aftermath of the crude oil invasion on their farms does not only destroy their source of income, no doubt, it truncates and shatters the dreams of these women. Women are however represented in the novel as endangered species in degraded environments, but however, tenacious in their resolve to survive against

all the environmental odds. The survival of these women and the realization of their dreams as shown by Agary, depend largely on the eloquent benevolence of the environment, as Zilayefa's chances of acquiring education are endangered by the crude oil that overruns her mother's farm. She laments that:

The day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither, but she carried on watering it with hope. The black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unraveled the threads that held together her fantasies for me. She was able to find new farmland in another village, but it was not the same... she rowed her canoe there and back every day with unwavering determination. In her mind, she would find a way to make sure I completed my education. I did not care as much as she did about finishing school; I just wanted to leave village. The sameness of life in the village would kill me if I did not escape (10).

Also recounting the severe predicaments of the female character in the novel, Agary reveals how the domestic chores that sustained her great grandmother, grandmother and now her mother have been eroded by flood and ailing environment. She reflects the ecological oppression against women in this manner:

Farming and fishing, the occupations that had sustained my mother, her mother and her mother's mother no longer provided again. I had witnessed lands claimed by massive floods during the rainy season; the earth slowly melting into the rivers. Women rowed their canoes farther and farther away to find land for farming. In addition, every year it was harder to catch fish, as though the water spirit had tied the fishes' wombs, until people barely bothered to cast their nets (39).

Agary in the excerpts shows that the current environmental degradation in the Niger-Delta region treats women quite unfairly and viciously too. The Niger Delta women are at the receiving end of the environmental disasters that have reduced the region close to nothingness. Agary shows what an endangered species, women have become at the heat of the global environmental challenges. Buttressing further on the predicaments of women in degraded environments, Agary laments:

My ears still rang from maternal wails piercing the foggy days when mothers mourned a child lost to sickness or to the deceptively calm water that lay hungry below the stilt latrines, waiting to swallow the children whose unsteady feet betrayed them before they had learnt to swim. How many more times could I bear the pain like a hundred razor blades slashing my private parts because the river water that washed it was the same water that received the waste

rejected by my body in its attempt to cleanse itself? (39)

Women are not only suffering from the hunger induced by oil spillage in the Niger-Delta region and the mourning of their drowned children, but they are also suffering from diseases and infections as a result of their unavoidable contact with contaminated water. Since the marshy nature of their landscape cannot allow them access to clean drinking water and decent toilet facilities, they are left with no other option than to drink and bath with the same water that received their wastes. Zilayefa decries situations where, "the water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines that moved the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank" (39).

Despite the overflowing wealth in their region, the Niger-Delta women are continually impoverished and as a result, are exposed to dangers and hazards of life even as their young girls devise other means of livelihood and sustenance. Most of the girls have to drop out from school and take to prostitution in order to send money to their families. "As for the girls, they drop out from school to have their babies or, as my mother would say, to "turn" *ofogorious* with the jobless boys in town" (34). Zilayefa sums it regrettably that:

I could find my way to a place like Bonny, the base of expatriates working for the oil companies, and sell my body to a whitey. Some girls from my town did that in order to send money to their families. They all had the same look, whether they sold themselves in Warri, Bonny, or in Port Harcourt (35).

Unequivocally, as these oil workers are polluting and exploiting the Niger-Delta environment, they are also polluting and exploiting their young girls who, in their crestfallen position had chosen to use what they have to get what they lack. The young girls are brutally handled by their willful exploiters, who beat and push objects in their private parts as part of fun-catching. In her lamentable posture, Agary through Zilayefa claims that:

Our visitors told us of times when they fell into the hands of a crazy whitey who beat them up or pushed objects like bottles into their private parts as part of the "fun." It seemed that, sometimes, there were so many unimaginable horrors to get through before the "clients" released the money (37-38).

It is however regrettable to note that the act of prostitution these young girls engaged themselves in, most often warp their virtues, values, integrity, vigor, and potentials. "Some of them came back with skin that look like someone had touched wet coal and rubbed it over them tauntingly-some here, some there...their skin had an acrid smell, worse than the odour of festering wound...." (35) It should be noted that the girls of Niger-Delta are forced into

prostitution in order to make ends meet. Prior to the discovery of oil, the issue of prostitution was not as it is now. The hunger induced by a destabilized environment lives no hope of survival for the female character in the region, hence the inordinate quest to sustenance. Zilayefa reveals that most of the girls who were looking to escape poverty were looking to white men to rescue them hence, “every night, girls trooped into the hotel lobby, looking for a chance to snatch up a white man” (168). She argues that “hundreds of girls left their villages... to get a chance with the whitey” (168). As the good qualities of the girls are lost to prostitution, the region’s hope of continuity and sustainability is gravely endangered, this is even as “oil companies and their pipe were in our backyards” (138), according Agary.

It is evident in the novel that women of the Niger Delta region suffered in the hands of the white expatriates who cashed in on the prevailing challenges of these women who ecological situations have forced to abandon their farms and other sources of income that had earlier sustained them before the discovery of oil in the region. These white men, who are predominantly oil workers, use what they have, to lure these women into things that have only increased the number of “born-troways”, “ashawo-pickins”, and “father-unknown” in the region. Revealing the growing spate of physiological exploitation of the female character in *Yellow-Yellow*, Zilayefa decries that:

There could have been something they offered besides money, that thing that my mother had fallen for. It was that thing I had been looking to key into. I had wanted to understand what it was besides money that made beautiful twenty-year-old girls look at their short, fat, ugly fifty-eight-year-old white husbands with so much affection. Maybe then I could understand better or with less anger why there were more and more of my kind- “African-profits,” “born-troways,” “ashawo-pickins,” “father-unknowns,” – running around the slums of Port Harcourt (171).

It is observable from Zilayefa’s tone that the female characters in the Niger Delta region suffer from inferiority complex considering the fact that despite their beauty and good qualities, yet they crave for these old ugly white men. It shows how helpless the women of Niger Delta have suddenly become as a result of their inability to access their legitimate source of income and livelihood. Instead of working on their farms which have been overrun by crude oil and streaks of oil spill, they now depend on the same people who exploit their environments to equally exploit their bodies too. These young girls are forced by the conditions they find themselves in to engage in ungodly practices. To catch a whitey, they engage the services of witch doctors who prepare charms that enable them trap down their victims. Agary recalls

that “...if the girls were lucky and had the right native doctor, they could get their whitey to fall in love with them and maybe take them away to the whitey’s home country” (37). The ecological conditions in the Niger Delta region have taken almost the virtues in these promising young girls as they do not mind doing anything possible to grab the men who degrade their environment. Agary decries that “girls did anything to get a whitey. If it meant travelling deep into the bushes of Isoko land to get a love potion, then it has to be so. If it meant putting a scar on another girl’s face for daring to swoop in on the whitey discovered and laid claim first, then they were prepared...” (37). These ladies are ever battle ready to exploit the men that exploit their land without knowing that they are only dancing to the evil tunes of a destabilized environment. Zilayefa however, regrets that “there were other people around me whose fathers were a mystery to them, just like mine...men in high society who had no problem sleeping with their lower-class mothers...” (174)

The recent environmental degradation in the Niger-Delta region portends grave danger to the women of Niger-Delta considering the volume of destabilization and sufferings it has exposed them to. The current spate of oil spillage, gas flaring, and flood have forced them to reminisce the times past before the discovery of oil and its aftermath in the Niger-Delta region:

My mother told me of the days of her youth when every husband was expected to give his new wife a dugout canoe...the wife would use it to fish, earn a living and help to feed the family...those were the days when Ijaw women cooked a fresh pot of soup every day because the rivers were teeming with fish. Their farms held plantain trees so fertile that there was more plantain than anyone knew what to do with... Those were the days. Nowadays, the men were even more oppressive than women alive could remember. They demanded a healthy meal when they were hungry, disregarding the fact that the women had to walk extra kilometers to get firewood or cultivate or harvest the food now fertilized by their sweat and blood (39-40).

The women of Niger Delta region are at the receiving end of the environmental destabilizations in the region. Agary through her narrator, reveals how mothers used the dugout canoes built for them by their husbands to fish in order to help feed their families. But today the story is different as the water ways are poisoned and fishes are nowhere to be found. She regretted the fact that farms in the Niger Delta region before the discovery of oil in the region were fruitful and was feeding the teeming poor citizens of that region. But now, one can hardly say if the plantains are still standing on the Niger Delta soils as a result of the activities of oil prospecting companies. As if to worsen the woes of the women, the men of the region

have become more oppressive than they were before the discovery of oil. The men now ask of healthy food disregarding the fact that women have to walk extra kilometers to gather just firewood and couple with the fact that the land and rivers are no longer yielding.

Despite the searing environmental degradation, the women of the Niger-Delta are represented in the novel as hardworking, courageous, ambitious, competent and industrious. Their industry is reflected in their resolve to forge ahead despite their enfeebling environment. Make the environment conducive, the Niger-Delta women will strive in business, farming, and indeed all facets of life and also be supportive to their families and even contribute to nation building as they are eager to be educated, to explore and break new grounds. To prove this point, Agary embeds in Zilayefa the attributes that make her unique despite the fact that she got herself into troubles, in her quest for paternal attention which she lacks as a child...“I was hoping the relationship would give me a taste of close paternal affection that I had never had” (13).

Agary also reveals that women outside degraded environments are hardworking and industrious too. Sisi and Lolo all Ijaw women living in Port Harcourt, are used in the novel to show the industry of women in safe environments. Sisi, despite her low level of education, was a successful business woman, creative and full of ideas. Let us see Sisi through Agary’s eye view:

Sis is had not attended school beyond primary six, preferring instead to work. She had been exposed to all the influences that had converged Port Harcourt in those days, long before Nigeria’s independence from the British. Sisi used that exposure and the influence of her elder brother to get contract jobs for construction and even food supply in the government-run hospitals. She opened her boutique soon after her first contract in the late sixties. Sisi was so business savvy and creative that she was good at coming up with ideas for projects that she would sell to the procurement officer of an establishment...that was how she made her money (54-5).

In Lolo, the granddaughter of one of the famous Leslie-Cole brothers is imbued with qualities that stand her out. Agary writes that despite the fact that Lolo comes from a well-to-do family, “she was very adventurous” (59). Agary maintains that, “as soon as she started making her own money, she took trips... she travelled for pleasure, but on every trip, she bought things to sell back home... wherever she went, she returned with merchandise for sale – gold, clothing, accessories etc” (59). This is how industrious women can be in environments that are devoid of deprivation, debasement, and degradation.

In totality, Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* underscores the predicaments of women in destabilized environments. It reveals the level of psychic and physical entrapment

of women in environments that are threatened by the activities of oil exploration and exploitation. The exploration and exploitation of oil and its aftermath anywhere, have greatly affected women negatively in their quest for survival. Agary however highlight, the plights of women in degraded environments and her commitment to the feminist cause is overtly registered in *Yellow-Yellow*.

Conclusively, in *Yellow-Yellow*, the personal patterns the women’s lives and experiences are presented with the same validity as are its social patterns in *The Activist*. The novels are both environmental novels of truth and imagination that expose the plethora of challenges faced by a minority group. The two novelists are able to recount their experiences successfully, first as natives of the degraded region, and secondly by their vantage statuses as writers who are committed to shaping their societies. These multinational oil prospecting companies that trade human health for profit care less about the hazards their activities cause to the environment and the people living there.

Recommendations

Women of Niger-Delta region are faced with overwhelming risk of living unfulfilled life if the operations of the multinational companies who exploit their environment continue unchecked. To stop the spate of the environmental disasters that women of Niger Delta face, the article proffers the following recommendations;

Legislation enhancing the well-being of the inhabitants of Niger Delta region should be immediately and proper punishment meted out against any defaulting. Multinational Companies operating in the Niger Delta region should build hospitals where women of the region should have unfettered access to medical facilities. Also, outreaches should be carried out by relevant government agencies and faith based organizations, educating women on the ways to live healthily in degraded environments. Moreso, creative writer and literary critics are advised to fight against all sorts of social vices and injustices through the instrumentalities of their art.

## CONCLUSION

This article stretches a bit further, the discussion on eco-critical study in fiction. It examined Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*, dwelling not only on environmental degradation per se, but strictly on the effects of environmental malignancies on the female character. The novelist, a member of the Niger-Delta region and a woman too, invests herself in chronicling a first class experience of the goings-on in that region as it affects women. The present writers attempt to unravel sundry environmental hidden battles confronting women and the effects of these regrettable battles on them in degraded environments. Despite the industry of the Niger Delta women as seen in the novel, the women still have to contend with the hostile environment which continues to threaten their health

and lives of their children. The study shows that the many dreams of women in Niger Delta regions are affected by their present environment.

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