Eco-Feminist Assessment of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

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Abstract
Post independence Nigerian literature has been a channel of provocative literary commitment decrying amongst other misfortune, the diverse indication of discontent. The compelling scholarship articulating the connection between the literary presentation of crude oil exploration and exploitation is attracting bountiful erudition. So, there is a lacuna that needs to be filled; this is the idea behind this study which focuses on the effects of crude oil exploration and exploitation on the environment and how this environmental degradation as well affects the female gender. It analyses how the oppressive propensity of some crude oil companies (indigenous and foreign) in collaboration with the Nigerian State negatively creates sorrow for the female folk dwelling Nigeria's Niger Delta. The study employs content analytical approach through eco-feminism to critically assess the impact of oil exploration on the female inhabitants of the Niger Delta region as portrayed by Kaine Agary in her novel, *Yellow-Yellow*.
Keywords: Nigerian literature, oil exploration, oil exploitation, females, eco-feminism.

Introduction

The literary representation of the negative impact of crude oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta region and how it causes environmental degradation that negatively affects the female gender is the motivation for this study. The Niger Delta region is arguably the wealth base of Nigeria. Unfortunately, despite the richness of the region, the people are in despair as Akpo Mudiaga-Odje (2008:13) laments:

> For decades, oil exploration have been going on in Nigeria …. The oil bearing areas have been degraded. They have been robbed and they have nothing to show for the God-given wealth. They have no light, no water, no roads and no decent accommodation …. This vividly explains why the area has become hot-beds of crisis.

As a result of this injustice, one would expect to hear the voice of the people demanding for freedom which Kaine Agary's in *Yellow-Yellow* tries much to elucidate. The present structure of dehumanization in the Niger Delta region reinforces the terrible ordeal Nigerians undergoas they are assailed by their fellow compatriots and foreign interests. Expectantly, literature plays a key taskin the emancipation of the people of the Niger Delta. Thus, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972: XV) assertion is instructive as he insists that "literature does not develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape and direction and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and other forces cannot be ignored".

Perhaps, it is worthy to note that the idea of liberation does not end with the advent of independent Nigeria, but rather that marks the beginning and it is something that must be guarded jealously. This supports the view of Apronti (1978: 78): "the modern African writer must be in the forefront of those who are causing progressive change …. And that is one way in which he can demonstrate immediately his relevance to his people on the one hand, and on the other, his right to take the place of his traditional counterpart in our modern world". So, the anguish amongst Nigerians can be corrected if there is synergy of purpose between writers and the masses in the struggle for liberation and enhancement of their humanity. In highlighting the atrocities committed against the people, it is assumed that literature will play major part. Hence, writers see literature as recreation of human experiences. To this, Chidi Amuta (1986:38-39) posits that "as the refraction of social experience through the prism of the human imagination, the anthological essence of literature is to be located in terms of the extent to which it recycles social experience and transforms it into an aesthetic proposition". It is in line with this, that this paper seeks to discuss the reflections of the experiences of the people of the Niger Delta and the Efforts by Kaine Agary to portray it in her novel by suggesting ways to confront it headlong. This is the task that this paper has elected to address especially as it affects the female-folk.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that is applied in this study is Eco-feminism approach to literature. Eco-feminism literary approach seeks the connection between the female gender and nature. Eco-feminists go on to expound that the oppressive tendencies of the woman has historical origin in exploration and exploitation of the environment, leading them to be lurked in stark poverty as they become victims of corruption and oppression. The study of women and ecology is a sub-belief of literature which zeroes in to how the natural environment negatively or positively

influence women. To the eco-feminists, nature is created in reality against the womanas their concern is the same subject and object which is women and their relationship with nature.

Eco-feminism was coined by the French writer Francoise d' Eaubome in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* in 1978. The main premise of eco-feminism is that social and environmental issues are not divorced from each other, that the reason for the oppression of women and environment originate from the same place; that the domination of women and environmental pillage are symptoms of patriarchy and capitalism. Consequently, eco-feminists view all these issues collectively as the complicated treatment of women and nature are deeply connected. Eco-feminism reiterate that women and nature must be respected. As Susan Buckingham (2004:3) maintains:

> …. Marxist and social feminist literature show how women's position in society (as, for example, careers of children and other vulnerable family members, domestic workers, and low paid/status workers derived from prevailing social and economic structures), expose them to a particular set of environmental incivilities.

Note that Eco-feminism is not only about oppression of the female gender but also children, poor people, nature and people of colour. They believe that patriarchal society oppresses female gender and nature by their notion of superiority of male gender. Environmental dissipation is systematic agenda of male gender against the female gender. To them, men's choice that is inimical to nature influence women in the society. For when man debase the environment, the woman suffer adversity as the habitat of such environment is affected. Philip Bagu (2010: 119) asserts that:

> Environmental degradation is a process through which the natural environment is compromised in some ways, reducing biological diversity and the general health of the environment. This process can be entirely natural in origin, or it can be accelerated or caused by human activities.

Eco-feminist literature sprouts from literary criticism in the 1990s and it continues to grow as an area of literary scholarship due to unending worldwide environmental exigency. Eco-feminism tends to show how literary works about the environment can help in resolving ecological issues. William Slaymaker (2007:683) postulates that:

> Nature writing, land issues, and landscape themes are pertinent to national and local culture claims …. and also function as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environmental evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated.

In line with the tenets of Eco-feminism, efforts are made in this study .to ascertain how oil exploration in the Niger Delta affects both the environment and women.

Eco-Feminist Assessment of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* portrays life in the Niger Delta from a feminine point of view. The novel expresses socio-political and environmental obliteration of the Niger Delta region by oil companies and the Nigerian state. The thematic concern of *Yellow-Yellow* runs through the terrible experience of Zilayfa, the protagonist and other characters. Through Zilayefa, Kaine Agary shares passionate overwhelming desire to communicate the need for the Niger Delta people to reject the bastardisation of their environment. Zilayefa is a representative of the down-trodden in Niger Delta region, through her, we see the struggle of women in a society on the grip of environmental degradation and social inequalities. From childhood, she experiences harsh

reality of living in the debased and oppressive Niger Delta region. Zilayefa perspective about her poor mother's zeal in catering for her well-being is important as Agary notes that "she had inherited a small piece of land from her family, which she farmed and sometimes she would go fishing. With the proceeds, she was able to feed us and pay my school fees. She took care of my needs and even went without sometimes to make sure that I got an education". (8) Zilayefa insistence to seek better education in Port Harcourt reflects her belief that education can help remedy the situation. We see Zilayefa's desperation to get out of her suffocating condition. Zilayefa is endangered andabused, so is the environment too. The author by assigning Zilayefa this resistance spirit believes in the assertion of Sunny Awhefeada (2017:98) that:

> Agary reframes the Niger Delta story into a metaphoric novel that can be read along two narrative leads. First, the region in all its pristine endowment and edenic bliss was devastated and disrupted by the exploitation and exploration of oil by foreigners aided by local conquistadors. The second narrative thread depicts the violation of women in the region by foreign oil workers, and also by the indigenous bourgeoisie. What comes to fore is the violation and debasement of both the land and violation of women, which often results in unwanted pregnancy, amputates their ambitions, aborts their dreams and confines them to the abyss of impoverishment (98).

One of the significant contributions of Kaine Agary is her uncanny ability to portray the characters: their dreams, fears, torture, sorrow. Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is a moving story of characters developing into disillusioned individuals. The conflict between environmental abjection and contentment of life is eloquently and sadly depicted; indeed, this rendering of suffering people of Niger Delta region reflects the disaster of the Niger Delta region in post independent Nigeria.

Like other writers writing on environmental exploration and exploitation of Niger Delta region, the author delineates how the women like the environment, suffer from brutality of the Nigerian state and oil companies. Her portrayal of Zilayefa's mother's encounter with Plato Papadopoulous, Zilayefa's Greek father, is an allusion of the negative posture of foreign expatriates against the people and environment of the region. The evil collaboration between the oil companies and government is further hampering the development of the region. Zilayefa, a victim of the steamy relationship of her mother and the Greek sailor laments:

> "Yellow-Yellow". That is what most people in my village called me because of my complexion, the product of a Greek father and an Ijaw mother. My father was a sailor whose ship had docked briefly in Nigeria about one year before I was born. After months in sea, he was happy to see a woman and would have told her anything to have her company. The woman he chose was my mother, a young and naïve eighteen-year-old who had just moved to Port Harcourt from her small village with vision of instant prosperity. (7)

Kaine Agary created the image of an inexperienced woman with the hurt of heart frustration but also showed her resistance to fate. She lives for herself and succeeds in being woman in new era. She represents a victim of foreign exploration and exploitation of her resources just like the Niger Delta region, the region that is currently a desolate enclave. For Kaine Agary, no matter the advantageous conditions and autonomous choices Zilayefa possess, her role in the society is limited, she is tied to a consciousness of inextricable mystery and an inescapable fate: "For the few weeks he was in Port Harcourt, she was in heaven. She believed that she had found her life

partner and that this man would take care of her …. Instead, he left Port Harcourt without saying good-bye …. Leaving behind his planted seed in my mother's belle" (7).

With this, Kaine Agary's message in the novel is in an accordance with Emmanuel Akubor (2011:30) assumption on the degradation of women in the Niger Delta region:

> The activities of the multinational companies, the oil exploitation in the Niger Delta area which has been the bone of contention between the people and the companies has brought more devastating effect on the communities much more on the woman folk. Apart from the loss of farmland, which is the main source of livelihood, oil spillages have led to the displacement of settlement as well as extensive deforestation with no adequate replanting practices.

Kaine Agary successfully describes the hustle and bustle of city life in the Niger Delta region where women are at the mercy of fake domineering foreigners who merely use the women for fun. As Jerome Thomas (2003:28) observes:

> The multinational oil companies have been very brutal to women behaving like animals as they take advantage of the poor illiterate girls of the Delta by making them victims of lust …. These girls inhabit creeks and villages separated by rivers and seas and have little contact with the outside world …. due to the poor living conditions fall victims …. to these men. At the end of their search and exploitation for oil, these workers leave the women behind with no contact address. They leave young unemployed mothers and kids.

Zilayefa childhood experience doomed her to be attracted by evil men. The women are ruined the same manner Niger Delta region is ravaged. Apart from being charmed with lies, the women of Niger Delta region and the environment have nothing to cherish. Zilayefa laments: "Disillusioned, my mother went back to her village to face the shame of being an unwed mother with nothing but dreams about my future". (8) Hence, a notion is created around the children, that they are the products of "ashawo" mothers who are looking for greener pasture with their bodies. This is the portrayal to the fact that white expatriates in Niger Delta are sought after by the women as means of livelihood. Again, Zilayefa relieves her sad experience:

> The rest of us were born-troways, rejected by our fathers or worse, nonexistent to them. Folks in my hometown know me as Yellow-Yellow, but I never thought much about the circumstances of my existence until I got to Port Harcourt …. There was even much less regard for born-troways such as me. We are product of women of easy virtue who did not have morals to pass on to their children. (174)

Like her mother, Zilayefa's quest for a better life resulted to her sojourn in Port Harcourt. Port Harcourt represents the abundance of everything lacking in the village. With the recommendation of her pastor Zilayefa eventually became family member of a wealthy and caring woman, Sisi and her enterprising friend Lolo. She has to make a journey to Port Harcourt in search of freedom from the unjust society. Although she lives comfortably with Sisi, she is confronted by the constant fear of a brutal military regime known for economic hardship and super inflation imposed on the citizenry in contrast to the abundant wealth of the Niger Delta region. "I was living as if there was nothing to worry about but all around me there was palpable fear, fighting and poverty. The same poverty and discontent in my village that I was running away from was present in Port Harcourt…. There was a lot to complain about, but not many people dared to do so publicly" (99)

Accordingly, the environmental plundering of the Niger Delta region breeds kidnapping of indigenous and foreign oil workersas well as government officials whom the people see as collaborators in their dehumanization. The activities of "militants", "freedom fighters" in the region is largely as a result of passive provocation and oppression, Victor Ojakorotu (2008:93) affirms that:

> The activism can be attributed (on the part of the people of the region) to be arising from both state and oil companies' negligence and destruction of the Niger Delta's ecology which is the basic structure in the region, as elsewhere. It may be said that the struggle by the people have been predicted on certain issues, namely: their exclusion or marginalisation in terms of access to oil revenue; their struggle for greater access to resource sharing (known in Nigeria parlance as resource control); environmental degradation and egregious human rights violation.

Yellow-Yellow highlights the revolutionary temper of the novelist as she shows the rise of marginalised group, disadvantaged community of Niger Delta women folk, distinct group suffering the hardship of oil related environmental violence. Kaine Agary particularly stupefies her readers as she becomes the imaginative voice for hitherto unacknowledged women of the Niger Delta region. We see that as Zilayefa begins her search for meaningful life, she leaves the village to Port Harcourt, she tries as much as possible to disconnect herself from environment-induced indignity and perhaps retain her self-esteem from the trap of father figure and sugar daddy. By aborting her pregnancy, she disapproves her terrible condition:

> I soon started looking for plants that resembled the one girls in the village claimed were used to "wash out" belle … I returned to my room later and chewed up the plant I had picked, leaf and bark together … I lay curled up in the foetal position on the cool tile floor until sweat and blood that gushed from between my legs drenched my clothes …. Screaming as my body pushed out blood and clumps of tissues that had been forming a little person inside me for almost three months. (176 & 177 & 178)

In the Niger Delta region, excessive pollution coupled with poverty has instigated the people to demand for environmental and economic justice. In a world of social injustice, economic imbalance, human rights violation, environmental exploration and exploitation, people tend to seek alternative answer to the role of the rulers in bringing justice to the oppressed people, justifying the anger of youths in the region as conveyed by Zilayefa: "Every young boy had visions of dying valiantly for the cause, as Ken Saro-Wiwa, just had and as Isaac Adaka Boro had nearly thirty years before him …. So, boys wandered about the village aimlessly, dropping the phrase "Aluta Continua" at the slightest provocation" (34). Correspondingly, Uzoechi Nwagbara (2008: 235) admonishes the indigenous writers and activists to demand for environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta region:

> It could be gleaned that the Niger Delta environment made comatose by the conduct of the multinationals and the Nigerian government is an area that the Nigerian writer should focus on ….. And the knowledge gained from having come from the area …. To reconstruct the inhumanity and despoliation to which the Niger Delta community and its inhabitants are being subjected.

Yellow-Yellow divulges the depressed tale of environmental depredation in Niger Delta region. At the beginning of the novel, oil spillage menace on hectares of farms and the nonchalant posture of the oil companies and government spur the villagers to constitute pressure group to

stop the environmental predicament. Thus, from the inception of the novel, the reader is expose to the evil machination of the oil companies and government. Zilayefa's view comes to mind: "A group of people, painted in the same black as my mother, some covered from head to toe, was marching to see the Amananaowei, the head of the village …. It turned out some of them has also lost their farmland that day. Some were crying, others were talking about compensation (4). By reporting to the village head, the villagers are revolting for change. Note the arrogance of the oil companies concerning compensation for the destruction caused by oil spillage. Kaine Agary unfolds more instances of air and water pollution in the village: "The community took the mater up with the oil company that owned the pipes, but they said they suspected sabotage by the youths and were not going to pay compensation for all the destruction that the burst pipes had caused. And so it was that in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance" (40). Before now, as a young child, Zilayefa had experienced tragedy of environmental pollution in her village:

> I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drawing small animals in its path. It just keep spreading …. There was so much and we could not do nothing with it-viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep. I stayed there, in a daze, until someone shouted at me, "You no go commot for there? You dey look like say na beta tin"! Come on, leave dat place!" …. Not unlike the way she and others in the village had gradually lost, year after year, the creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares, and who know what else. (4)

Kaine Agary by bringing to us, *Yellow Yellow*, a simple but provocative novel, instills into the mind of the readers the irony of crude oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta region. Zilayefa's lamentation attest to this fact: "We could still see the orange sun, fading away into the sky, though the layer of smoke from gas flares in the neighboring villages" (21 & 22).

Apart from violence and environmental defilement, *Yellow-Yellow* is also a novel that is concerned about capitalism, new-colonialism and corruption in the Niger Delta region. Corruption is endemic in the Niger Delta region as well as in the Nigeria. Zilayefa speech to Damitete is a point to note: "There thousand naira got me my license without a driving test. The normal procedure requires a driving test, but after adequate palm-greasing, the licensing officers did not insist on it, technically anyone could get a drivers' license, even before they know how to drive, if they give money to the right officers" (85 -86). Also, the scholarship award provided by the oil companies and government for indigent students in the Niger Delta oftentimes do not get to them. Rather, corrupt individuals especially politicians from the region hijack it and sell the scholarship slots to family members and friends. Scholarship is given to beneficiaries based on political affiliation. Zilayefa could not access scholarship provided for her community: "we heard that the oil companies had educational scholarships for Niger Delta indigenes. The problem was that we never get more information after that announcement. Nobody told us where we could go to apply for them. Nobody told us what exactly we need in order to qualify for one". (11)

The traditional institution in the Niger Delta region indulge in corrupt practices. Traditional rulers and chiefs corruptly enrich themselves with monetary and other gifts from the oil companies and the Nigerian government. This problem resurfaces in the novel: "Young boys threatened to rough up the Amananaowei and his elders because rumours, probably true, had

reached their ears that the Amananaowei and his elders had received monetary compensation, meant for the village, from the oil company and shared it amongst themselves" (40). Corruption is so rampant that the judicial system is also entwined with corruption bug. Kaine Agary gives her verdict: "The judges were so corrupt that a simple case would be adjourned over and over again until the litigants and their lawyers got the message and paid some bribe to the judge. Whoever acted quicker received judgement in their favour. Such was the way of justice system" (106). What this implies is that the poor who cannot afford to bribe judges and lawyers often lose their cases.

Violence, on the other hand, has reached an alarming proportion with the murder of the Ogoni activists led by the Niger Delta environmental activist, Ken Saro Wiwa on October 10 1995. The activists were opposed to environmental pillage and other negative happenings in the region, they yearned to stop the problem with intellectual vigour but their brutal murder by the Sani Abacha military regime energises the people to react violently. The killing of the Ogoni 9 activists, many believe, spur the present violent agitation in the region. Peter Cunliffe-Jones (2010: 142) remarks that:

> On November 10, 1995, Saro-Wiwa and his supporters were hanged, their bodies then thrown into a lime pit to destroy their remains. After the execution, MOSOP broke apart and split into rival factions …. Soon, everyone in the delta was a rebel. In 2006, a new group formed called Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Seemingly more serious and better armed than previous outfits, its attacks grew in number and audacity over the months that followed. In 2009, MEND staged fresh attacks on oil pipelines.

It cannot be overlooked that the abuse of the Niger Delta environment occasioned by oil production is affecting the people physically and psychologically. The activities of the Nigerian state and oil companies no doubt is fueling violence in the region. Currently, the Niger Delta region is a war zone. Psalm Chinaka (2011: 29 & 31) regards the Niger delta region as: "One of the most militarized regions in Nigeria". He goes further to summarise the tragedy in the region thus: "Violence therefore includes vicious practices such as corruption, deprivation, oppression, social inequality, man's inhumanity to man, on the other hand, and all shapes of volatile revolutionary resistance against life-threatening shapes of social oppressions, on the other hand". With these inadequacies, Kaine Agary believes that oil and environmental violence is impeding the progress of the region:

> …. How the oil companies had destroyed our Niger Delta with impunity. They would discuss how the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others. They would proffer ideas about what the oil companies and the government had to do …. If we had to suffer amidst such plenty, then these boys would cause as much havoc as possible until someone took interest in our plight and until justice, as they saw it, prevailed. (9)

Ken Saro-Wiwa's speech before his death, according to Kaine Agary is an inspiration to the countless freedom fighters in the region: "It was the year after the government hanged Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with nine other Ogonis, for inciting an insurrection that led to the death of four elders in Ogoni land … Every young boy had visions of dying valiantly for the cause …. The reports were that Ken Saro-Wiwa's last words on the day of his execution were "Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues" (34). Majority of the people in Niger Delta region see Ken Saro-Wiwa as a martyr and his death in the custody of the government and the conspiracy of the oil

companies further intensifies the violence perpetuated against the people. Kaine Agary echoes it: "After the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, many Ogonis were smuggled out of Nigeria through Benin Republic and Togo to seek political asylum in Canada and the United States" (73). Until the injustice, violence and environmental malaise, effects of oil exploration and exploitation is resolved, the violence in the region will not abate. Hence Oladoyin Anthony Mayowa (2001:9) reflects that: "Violence in Nigeria can be explained from environmental and economic perspective. It draws its origin from very harsh living conditions, exclusion from political participation and the brutal experience of ethno-communal skirmishes, which have recently become a feature of life in Nigeria".

Conclusion

The focus of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is basically the effects of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta region which she believes can be eradicated if the Nigerian state, local and foreign companies are responsive to the Niger Delta environment as well as the people of the region. It is instructive to state that the elite from the region are not helping the situation. Many critics of former president of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who is an indigene of the Niger Delta region asserted that his rulership of Nigeria failed the Niger Delta people. Paul Bebenimibo in an interview with *Vanguard Newspaper* of December 13, 2012 denounced the terrible condition of the Niger Delta region: "Now that we have a South-South man as president, people of the Niger Delta are still suffering and that is capable of resurrecting insurgency …. Our people are not happy with the performance of Mr President". It is surprising that even when a man from the Niger Delta region became the President of Nigeria, only a little was done to better their lot. So, in *Yellow-Yellow*, Kaine Agary presents the negative environmental consequences of oil exploration in the region and how it severely affects the wellbeing of the people especially women and children who suffer different kinds and levels of exploitation, oppression and neglect.

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