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Language, Power, and Environmental Justice in the Niger Delta: An Eco-Linguistic and Semiotic Reading of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

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Abstract
This study examines the intersection of language, power, and environmental justice in the Niger Delta through an eco-linguistic and social semiotic reading of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. Positioned within the interdisciplinary framework of Environmental Humanities, the paper interrogates how linguistic choices and symbolic structures construct ecological meaning. It also examines how these choices and structures encode environmental injustice in a region marked by oil exploitation and socio-political marginalization. The study adopts a qualitative textual approach to examine how language, imagery, and symbolic representations shape environmental understanding and reflect power relations. It focuses on the ways discourse patterns, metaphors, and signs influence perceptions of environmental issues in the Niger Delta. The findings reveal that language in the novel functions not merely as a descriptive tool but as an ideological instrument that obscures corporate accountability, constructs identities, and mediates resistance. Semiotic elements such as oil, land, water, and the human body emerge as critical signifiers that articulate the paradox of resource abundance and environmental degradation. The study further demonstrates how the interplay of Standard English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous expressions re-centres marginalized voices and challenges dominant ecological narratives. With the fusion of eco-linguistics and semiotics, this paper contributes to ongoing debates in environmental literature and environmental justice, foregrounding the role of discourse and symbolism in shaping ecological realities. Finally, this study suggests that environmental crises are shaped by both material conditions and linguistic and semiotic representations, underscoring the relevance of interdisciplinary approaches within Environmental Humanities.
Keywords: Environmental Humanities; Eco-linguistics; Social Semiotics; Environmental Justice; Niger Delta; *Yellow-Yellow*

Introduction

The growing global concern over environmental degradation has led to the emergence of Environmental Humanities as a critical interdisciplinary field that interrogates the complex relationship between humans and their ecological surroundings. Scholars such as Lawrence Buell (1995) and Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) have been instrumental in establishing eco-criticism as a literary response to environmental crises, emphasizing how texts represent and critique human interactions with nature. Buell (1995), for instance, argues that environmental texts must foreground the non-human environment not merely as a backdrop but as an active presence that shapes human experience. Similarly, Glotfelty (1996) defines eco-criticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, thus opening up literary studies to ecological concerns.

More than literary criticism, the linguistic dimension of environmental discourse has gained increasing attention through the field of eco-linguistics. M. A. K. Halliday (2001) interrogates how language contributes to ecological crises, arguing that dominant linguistic structures often encode exploitative attitudes toward nature. Building on this, Arran Stibbe (2015) introduces the concept of "stories we live by," demonstrating how language shapes ecological perception, behaviour, and ideology. Eco-linguistics therefore reveals that environmental degradation is not only material but also discursively constructed through language, metaphor, and narrative framing.

At the intersection of language and meaning-making lies semiotics, which provides a framework for understanding how environmental realities are represented and interpreted. While Saussure (1916) conceptualises meaning as emerging through systems of signs, Barthes (1972) extends this perspective by demonstrating how signs operate ideologically within cultural contexts. Building on these foundations, social semiotics, particularly in the work of Halliday (1978) and Kress and Hodge (1988), shifts attention to the social production of meaning, emphasising that signification is shaped by cultural practices and power relations. This progression is particularly relevant to environmental analysis because it enables ecological elements such as land, water, oil, and the human body to be examined not merely as physical entities but as semiotic resources through which broader socio-political realities are constructed and communicated.

In the Nigerian context, particularly the Niger Delta, environmental degradation has generated literary texts that interrogate ecology, identity, and power. Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) is one such text, portraying the lived realities of oil exploitation, pollution, and marginalization. While existing studies have explored the novel from postcolonial, feminist, and ecological perspectives, there remains a gap in scholarship that integrates eco-linguistic and semiotic approaches to examine how language and signs construct environmental meaning and injustice.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive textual methodology grounded in eco-linguistic and social semiotic analysis. Textual excerpts were purposively selected from *Yellow-Yellow* based on their relevance to environmental degradation, identity formation, linguistic representation, and socio-political marginalisation in the Niger Delta. The analysis followed a two-stage procedure. First, discourse features such as lexical choices, metaphorical constructions, evaluative language, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion were identified using Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistic framework. Second, recurring motifs and symbolic elements, including oil, land, water, and the human body, were examined through the principles of social semiotics to

determine how they construct environmental meaning and encode power relations. The integration of these analytical stages enabled a systematic examination of the ways linguistic and semiotic resources contribute to representations of environmental injustice in the novel.
To guide the study, the following research questions are addressed: how does language in *Yellow-Yellow* encode environmental ideologies? In what ways do semiotic structures construct environmental injustice? How does linguistic plurality function as resistance?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrative theoretical framework that brings together eco-linguistics and social semiotics to examine how environmental meaning, power relations, and ecological consciousness are constructed in literary discourse. This interdisciplinary approach aligns with the broader objectives of Environmental Humanities, which seek to bridge the divide between linguistic structures, cultural representation, and ecological realities. Eco-linguistics provides the first pillar of this framework by foregrounding the role of language in shaping environmental perception and behaviour. Rooted in the work of M. A. K. Halliday (2001), eco-linguistics challenges the assumption that language is neutral, instead positing that linguistic systems encode ideologies that may either sustain or challenge ecological degradation. Halliday argues that dominant patterns of language often reflect anthropocentric worldviews that legitimize environmental exploitation. Building on this foundation, Arran Stibbe (2015) develops a more refined analytical model through his concept of "stories we live by." These "stories" are not merely narratives but recurring discourse patterns; such as framing, metaphor, evaluation, identity, and erasure that shape how individuals and societies understand and relate to the environment. Within literary texts, such patterns are embedded in narrative voice, descriptive language, and character interactions, making eco-linguistics a valuable tool for uncovering how environmental realities are discursively constructed.

However, while eco-linguistics effectively reveals how language encodes ecological ideologies, it does not fully account for the broader processes of meaning-making that extend beyond linguistic structures. This limitation necessitates the incorporation of semiotics, particularly social semiotics, as the second pillar of this study. The semiotic tradition, originating from Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), conceptualizes meaning as a system of signs, while Roland Barthes (1972) expands this understanding to include cultural texts, demonstrating how signs function ideologically. Moving beyond structuralism, Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge (1988) develop social semiotics, which emphasizes that meaning is not fixed but socially produced within specific cultural and power contexts. In this sense, signs are not merely representational but are active sites where ideology, power, and meaning intersect.

Within the context of environmental narratives, social semiotics enables the analysis of how elements such as oil, land, water, and the human body function as signifiers that convey complex ecological and political meanings. These elements are not neutral descriptors but semiotic resources that reflect and reinforce structures of power, exploitation, and resistance. For instance, oil in Niger Delta narratives often operates as a dual sign; simultaneously symbolizing wealth and destruction, thereby encapsulating the paradox of resource abundance and environmental devastation. Similarly, the human body, particularly in gendered representations, may function as a site where environmental and socio-political tensions are inscribed and negotiated. The integration of eco-linguistics and social semiotics in this study is both necessary and strategic.

While eco-linguistics focuses on how language constructs ecological realities through discourse patterns, social semiotics extends this analysis by examining how meaning is produced through a broader system of signs embedded in cultural and power relations. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive analytical lens that captures both the linguistic and symbolic dimensions of environmental representation.

More specifically, this study operationalizes eco-linguistics through the identification of key discourse features in the text, including lexical choices, metaphorical structures, evaluative language, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (erasure). These features are analyzed to uncover the underlying "stories" that shape the representation of the environment and its inhabitants. At the same time, social semiotics is employed to interpret the symbolic significance of recurring motifs and images within the narrative, examining how they function as signs that encode environmental meaning and articulate power relations. By synthesizing these approaches, the study moves beyond a purely thematic or descriptive analysis to a more nuanced interrogation of how environmental degradation and injustice are constructed, represented, and contested within the text. This integrative framework not only addresses the limitations of single-discipline approaches but also contributes to the evolving discourse within Environmental Humanities, where the intersection of language, meaning, and ecology remains a critical area of inquiry.

Interrogating Previous Studies

The interdisciplinary scope of Environmental Humanities has generated sustained scholarly engagement across literature, linguistics, and semiotics, particularly in relation to environmental degradation and human ecology. Within literary studies, eco-criticism remains a dominant framework for examining how texts represent environmental crises. Foundational works by Lawrence Buell (1995) and Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) establish that literature not only reflects environmental realities but also actively shapes ecological consciousness. Buell (1995) foregrounds the ethical imperative of environmental representation, insisting that the environment must be repositioned as an active presence rather than a passive backdrop. This position is further systematized by Greg Garrard (2004), who organizes eco-critical inquiry around recurring tropes such as pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, and dwelling, thereby offering a structured lens for interpreting environmental narratives. Although these studies illuminate environmental themes effectively, they pay limited attention to the linguistic mechanisms through which ecological meaning is constructed.

In African literary contexts, eco-critical scholarship has increasingly turned to the socio-political dimensions of environmental degradation, particularly in resource-rich regions such as the Niger Delta. The region has been described as "a theatre of both physical and symbolic violence, where the body, the land, and the future are consistently commodified" (Eke & Ambrose, 2025, p. 2), a characterization which emphasises the entanglement of ecology, economy, and identity. Empirical and literary studies alike highlight the devastating consequences of oil exploration. For instance, Afinotan and Ojakorotu (2009) observe that "oil prospecting activities… are associated with the destruction of vegetation, farmlands and human settlements," while also noting "severe environmental hazards… [including] destruction of fish and some other forms of aquatic life" (p. 194). Although such studies compellingly foreground environmental injustice, resistance, and identity formation, they often privilege thematic exposition over the linguistic and semiotic

processes through which these realities are constructed and mediated. Consequently, the linguistic and semiotic processes that shape environmental perception remain insufficiently examined.

Parallel to eco-criticism, eco-linguistics has emerged as a critical field concerned with the role of language in shaping ecological perception. Halliday (2001) argues that dominant linguistic systems often encode anthropocentric ideologies that normalize environmental exploitation. Extending this insight, Stibbe (2015) develops the influential concept of "stories we live by," demonstrating how discourse patterns such as metaphor, framing, evaluation, and erasure shape ecological thought and behaviour. Similarly, Stibbe (2014) contends that ecolinguistic analysis can reveal the narratives through which societies either sustain environmentally destructive practices or promote more ecologically responsible ways of living. This perspective is echoed by Gul, Elismariy, and Riaz (2025), who argue that language can either perpetuate exploitative attitudes toward nature or foster a sense of ecological interconnectedness. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that environmental issues are not only material phenomena but are also mediated through discourse. However, despite their valuable insights, much eco-linguistic research has concentrated on media, policy, and institutional texts, leaving literary narratives comparatively underexplored.

Closely aligned with eco-linguistics is critical discourse analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough (1995), which provides analytical tools for examining how language reproduces and legitimizes power relations. Within environmental discourse, CDA has been particularly useful in exposing how dominant narratives obscure responsibility and naturalize ecological exploitation. As Alexander and Stibbe (2014) observe, ecological discourse analysis must move beyond describing environmental language to examining how discourse shapes relationships between humans and the natural world. Such studies reveal that linguistic choices can influence public perceptions of environmental responsibility, often privileging institutional perspectives while marginalizing local experiences. Despite its analytical strength, eco-linguistic and discourse-based research has largely focused on non-literary texts such as media reports, policy documents, and institutional communications, leaving a significant gap in its application to literary narratives where language operates in more layered, symbolic, and imaginative ways. Semiotics further deepens this inquiry by foregrounding the processes through which meaning is produced and communicated. The structuralist insights of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) conceptualize language as a system of signs, while Roland Barthes (1972) extends this framework to cultural texts, revealing how signs encode ideological meanings. Social semiotics, as articulated by Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge (1988), shifts the emphasis to the social production of meaning, highlighting how signs are embedded within power relations and cultural contexts.

This perspective is further developed within social semiotics, which views meaning as emerging through socially and culturally organized semiotic resources rather than through language alone. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue, different semiotic resources possess distinct representational possibilities and constraints, shaping how meaning is produced and communicated within particular contexts. Within environmental narratives, this approach enables the interpretation of elements such as oil, land, water, and the human body as semiotic resources that articulate broader ecological and political realities. These elements function not merely as

descriptive features of the narrative but as signs through which environmental degradation, power relations, and social marginalization are represented and contested. The potential of such interdisciplinary integration is further demonstrated by Alexander and Stibbe (2014), who argue for a movement from the analysis of ecological discourse to the ecological analysis of discourse, thereby highlighting the importance of examining how meaning-making practices influence relationships between humans and their environments.

In spite of these rich theoretical developments, there remains a notable gap in scholarship that fully integrates eco-linguistics and semiotics within literary analysis, particularly in African contexts. As Rasheed (2023) observes, ecolinguistics "does not clearly delimit its object" and maintains "undecided" relationships with adjacent disciplines (p. 3), a condition that has limited its application in literary studies. Analyses of *Yellow-Yellow* have largely focused on identity, gender, and postcolonial hybridity, emphasizing the protagonist's negotiation of mixed heritage within a marginalized socio-economic environment. While these studies acknowledge the ecological backdrop of the Niger Delta, they seldom engage systematically with the linguistic and semiotic structures that produce environmental meaning. This omission is significant, as Eke and Ambrose (2025) argue that although the Niger Delta crisis has been widely examined through environmental and political lenses, there is a need to "redirect attention to the symbolic structures that both reflect and emphasise these material conditions" (p. 3). This gap necessitates an interdisciplinary approach that synthesizes eco-criticism, eco-linguistics, and semiotics to achieve a more nuanced understanding of environmental narratives. By blending these perspectives, the present study moves beyond thematic analysis to interrogate how language and signs actively construct environmental meaning, encode power relations, and articulate environmental justice. In doing so, it aligns with the extended objectives of Environmental Humanities and extends emerging integrative approaches exemplified in studies such as Meliana (2026) and Adawiyah (2025), thereby positioning literary texts as critical sites for the negotiation of ecological knowledge and ethical engagement.

Analysis

The storyline of Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* constructs the Niger Delta as a contested ecological and semiotic space in which language, power, and environmental justice are deeply entangled. Language in the novel is not a neutral medium of description but an ideological instrument that encodes ecological degradation, distributes agency, and mediates resistance. Power operates simultaneously at corporate, state, and patriarchal levels, while environmental justice emerges as both a material and discursive struggle over whose realities are named, legitimized, or erased. Through a strategic interplay of Standard English, Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous lexical insertions, and symbolic imagery, the text stages a multilayered critique of environmental exploitation and its human consequences.

The oil spill scenario at the beginning establishes the ecological crisis not merely as an environmental event but as an embodied experience mediated through language. The narrator's description foregrounds sensory overload and loss of control:

> I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path… There was so much oil, and we could do nothing with it—viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep (Agary, 2006, p. 12).

From an eco-linguistic perspective, the repeated lexical choices—"spread," "viscous," "black"—construct what Arran Stibbe (2015) identifies as a destructive ecological narrative, where nature is represented as overwhelmed and violated. The defamiliarizing phrase "thick liquid" strips oil of its economic connotations, exposing it instead as a toxic, invasive force. Semiotically, oil functions as both index and symbol: indexical in its physical trace of corporate activity, and symbolic in its association with wealth, modernity, and global capitalism. This duality produces a central contradiction—the same substance that signifies prosperity at the global level signifies death and contamination locally. This contradiction is reinforced through discursive patterns that obscure agency and redistribute blame. The narrator reports: "they said they suspected sabotage by the youths and were not going to pay compensation" (Agary, 2006, p. 12). Here, the shift from experiential narration to reported corporate discourse marks a transition from lived reality to institutional language. The use of "they said" introduces a distant, authoritative voice, while "suspected sabotage" exemplifies what Norman Fairclough (1995) terms ideological language: discursive strategies that legitimize power by deflecting responsibility. Environmental injustice is thus sustained not only through material practices but through linguistic framing that criminalizes victims and absolves perpetrators.

The insertion of Nigerian Pidgin in moments of urgency further complicates the linguistic cartography: "You no go commot for there? You dey look like say na beta tin'!" (Agary, 2006, p. 12). Pidgin here functions as a counter-discourse, a semiotic resource of immediacy, communal knowledge, and survival. Unlike the abstract, bureaucratic language of corporate discourse, Pidgin is grounded in lived experience. It encodes what social semioticians describe as modality: marking authenticity and emotional intensity. The contrast between Pidgin and Standard English thus reflects broader power dynamics: one language obscures, the other reveals. The paradox of abundance and deprivation is further articulated through the narrator's reflection on oil wealth: "If we had to suffer amidst such plenty, then these boys would cause as much havoc as possible…" (Agary, 2006, p. 17). The phrase "such plenty" operates as an ideological sign in the Barthesian sense, transforming material inequality into a normalized condition. Roland Barthes (1972) conceptualizes myth as a system that naturalizes historical and political contradictions; here, "plenty" signifies abundance while masking deprivation. The resulting tension fuels resistance, as local youths interpret violence as a means of forcing recognition. Environmental justice, in this context, becomes a struggle to reconcile the gap between what the land produces and what its inhabitants receive.

The semiotic burden of environmental injustice is also inscribed on the human body, particularly through the protagonist's racialized identity: "being yellow defined my interactions… people had preconceived notions… they thought we were conceited, promiscuous…" (Agary, 2006, p. 82).
The label "Yellow-Yellow" transforms the body into a signifier loaded with ideological meaning. From a social semiotic perspective, as developed by Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge (1988), the body becomes a site where cultural meanings are produced and contested. The narrator's mixed-race identity is not simply biological but semiotically constructed through discourse. Importantly, this identity is linked to the extractive economy: her foreign father's presence in the Niger Delta is part of the same global network that exploits the region's resources. Thus, environmental injustice extends beyond land and water to encompass identity and embodiment.

The novel's sustained use of Nigerian Pidgin further illustrates how language mediates power and survival. In the interaction between Bibi and the women's group: "I no get money so I dey return de cloth… I no join dis una women group again sef… Dey go!" (Agary, 2006, p. 16). The linguistic features; "una," "sef," "dey", encode social relations of inclusion, exclusion, and resistance. Pidgin operates here as a fully functional semiotic system, articulating economic realities shaped by environmental degradation. Scarcity, itself a consequence of ecological collapse, structures social interactions, and language becomes the medium through which these tensions are negotiated. This aligns with eco-linguistic insights that language not only reflects but actively constructs ecological and social realities.

Power is further revealed in the gendered dynamics of the narrator's relationship with Admiral, where economic dependency mirrors the broader extractive economy: "I have a friend who can take care of it" (Agary, 2006, p. 169). The euphemism "take care of it" exemplifies linguistic erasure, reducing pregnancy to a disposable inconvenience. This reflects how patriarchal power operates through language to normalize control over women's bodies. The narrator's rejection of this discourse and her turn to indigenous methods of abortion represent a form of semiotic resistance—an attempt to reclaim agency within oppressive structures. Here, environmental justice intersects with reproductive justice, demonstrating that ecological exploitation and bodily autonomy are interconnected.

The novel's code-switching between Standard English, Pidgin, and indigenous lexicon creates a multilingual semiotic field that resists homogenization. Expressions such as "Okoido" and references to local food and authority structures embed the narrative within its cultural ecology. This linguistic plurality challenges the dominance of Standard English and asserts the legitimacy of local knowledge systems. In doing so, the text aligns with eco-linguistic arguments that marginalized languages carry ecological knowledge and alternative ways of relating to the environment. In totality, *Yellow-Yellow* reveals that environmental injustice in the Niger Delta is sustained through a complex interplay of material exploitation and discursive practices. Language obscures responsibility, constructs identities, and mediates resistance; signs such as oil, land, and the body encode layered meanings that reflect and contest power relations. With the inclusion of eco-linguistic and semiotic analysis, this study demonstrates that the novel is not merely a representation of environmental degradation but an active site of meaning-making, where competing narratives of power, identity, and justice are negotiated. Agary's narrative therefore disrupts dominant "stories we live by," exposing the ideological foundations of environmental exploitation while foregrounding alternative voices and meanings. In doing so, the study contributes to Environmental Humanities by suggesting that ecological crises are understood and negotiated through both material realities and linguistic and semiotic representations, underscoring the importance of language and signification in shaping environmental consciousness and justice.

Conclusion

This study has examined Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* through the combined lenses of eco-linguistics and social semiotics, demonstrating that environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is both materially experienced and discursively constructed. The analysis reveals that language in the novel encodes ecological crisis through patterns of lexical choice, metaphor, and agency, while also exposing how power operates through discursive strategies that obscure responsibility and

normalize exploitation. At the same time, the study shows that language functions as a site of resistance. The use of Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous expressions re-centres local voices and challenges dominant narratives, while key semiotic elements such as oil, land, and the body operate as signs that communicate the contradictions of wealth, loss, and marginalization. In this way, environmental injustice is represented not only as ecological damage but as an extended system of power that shapes identity, voice, and lived experience. Through the fusion of eco-linguistic and semiotic approaches, this study contributes to Environmental Humanities by demonstrating that literary texts are critical sites where environmental meanings are constructed and contested. It affirms that addressing environmental justice requires attention not only to physical conditions but also to the language and symbolic systems through which those conditions are understood.

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