



The woman as a metaphor for the environment in Kaine Agary's: *Yellow Yellow*

Egbung Itang EDE

Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examines the exploitation of the woman in relation to the environment. The woman's deprivation and oppression hinders her from asserting and actualizing herself in the community of practice she finds herself, thereby confining her to docility and dependency. There is a symbolic parallel between the afflictions of the woman and the physical environment she occupies. The exploitation of the environment deprives it from yielding the needed fruits for human sustenance. Using the ecofeminist theory that argues that there are important connections between how one treats women and the non-human natural environment, this paper argues that the woman and the environment suffer the similar exploitative injustices which prevent them from achieving their set objectives in the society. The paper observes that the female body in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* is a metaphor for the environment. The paper concludes that the stoppage of the exploitation of the woman and the environment by the male gender and human actions respectively will be for the betterment of the society as their potentials will lead to the growth and development of the human and non-human societies.

Keywords: ecofeminism, woman, metaphor, environment, stereotype

1. Introduction

The female body is a metaphor for the environment in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria as depicted in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*. This is imperative because just as the environment is explored, exploited, polluted and abandoned by oil spillage, women equally suffer the similar fate from both Africans and non-Africans. The exploitation of the woman and the environment deprive them from yielding the needed benefits since they are rendered barren and unproductive by men and human activities respectively. Ovuoke Owahfasa in "Women as Victims" argues that:

The "woman" is most times metaphorically associated with the "earth". As society, through different phallogocentric standards, regards the woman as an object to be explored, exploited, degraded and dumped when she becomes barren, sterile and fagged out at old age, so has the earth been looked upon as a thing to be explored, exploited, degraded, and abandoned when it appears to be infertile and unproductive. (123)

The above assertion forms the crux of this paper. This will be expatiated using the ecofeminist theory which argues that there is a connection between how the woman and the non-human natural environment are treated.

2. The Concept of Ecofeminism

The concept of ecofeminism is derived from the nexus between ecology and feminism. Ecology has to do with plants, animals and the environment while feminism is the theory that encourages female assertion. Karen Warren in her introduction to *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* argues that ecofeminism also known as ecological feminism "is the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other" (xi). Warren notes that just as

there are varieties of feminism, "there is not one ecofeminism or one ecofeminist philosophy" (4). She further argues that ecological feminism has roots in the wide variety of feminisms such as liberal feminism, marxist feminism, radical and socialist feminisms, black and Third World feminism (4).

Kathryn Miles posits that "Ecofeminism, also called ecological feminism, branch of feminism...examines the connections between women and nature". Owahfasa also notes that "Ecofeminism is a term coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to give expression to the women's concerted efforts or struggles to preserve the natural world, which is constantly bombarded by humans in their bid to sustain themselves no matter how this agenda for human sustainability is negotiated" (124). She adds that Cheryll Glotfelty views ecofeminism as a "hybrid label to describe a theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature" (124). Encapsulated in ecofeminism is the notion that nature is a feminist issue because women relate more with forest products than men.

The concept of ecofeminism is closely related with Catherine Acholonu's "Motherism" in that Acholonu considers a "motherist" as an environmentalist. She weaves together the connectedness of the woman and the environment:

Motherism is a multidimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with mother-nature at all levels of human endeavour. Cooperation with nature is paramount to motherism and the task of the motherist is that of healing and protecting the natural cohesive essence of the family, the child, the society and the environment. Therefore, the Motherist must be a humanist, a healer, a co-creator with God and nature: an environmentalist. (110-111)

To this extent, Acholonu is of the view that the woman and the environment should be protected and not exploited and abandoned.

This paper configures and situates the exploitation and oppression of the woman in a patriarchal society along the same pedestal with the manner in which the environment – the landscape, the aquatic and the air are exploited in the Niger Delta Region using Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* for conceptualization.

3. The Woman and the Environment in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

The physical environment, the farmland of the peasants who depend on the farm proceeds as their source of livelihood is destroyed by the oil spillage, thereby rendering them helpless and frustrated. *Yellow-Yellow* opens with the frustration of Bibi, Zilayefa's mother who goes to her farm, only to discover that her farmland has been drowned by the oil spillage. The narrator captures the terrible experience thus

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. I was at home that day when she returned shortly after leaving for the farm.... I left them and ran to my mother's farm. It was the first time I saw what crude oil looked like, I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop, when it would stop, how far it would spread. (3-4)

The authorities and the government cannot salvage the situation; rather, they attribute it to sabotage. The oil drowns the farmland and the animals, and also pollutes the environment and makes it uninhabitable for humans. The narrator exposes the helplessness of the peasants thus

The community took the matter 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. (4)

The same manner the environment is exploited, polluted and abandoned, so is the young naïve woman manipulated by the exploitative men in the society. Firstly, Bibi, Zilayefa's mother, an 18-year old young school leaver, with the prospects of being gainfully employed in a company in the city of Port Harcourt, is deceived, exploited and abandoned by the Greek sailor who comes to Nigeria to work. Like the environment is destroyed by the oil spillage, so also is the young woman's future prospects truncated. The narrator tells us that:

...he left Port Harcourt without saying goodbye. She went to the port to look for him one day, as had become her habit, and was told that his ship had left. There was no message; he was just gone, leaving behind his planted seed in my mother's belle. (7)

The betrayal and abandonment of the woman is vividly

captured by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in "The Niger Delta, Environment, Women and the Politics of Survival" in her argument that "The seeming betrayal of women is synonymous with the betrayal of the desecrated land" (115). The exploited and abandoned woman (Bibi) recoils into her shell and works very hard to give her daughter a better future. She raises her as a single parent, and is determined that her daughter succeeds where she failed. The height of Bibi's commitment in bettering her daughter's life manifests in denying herself some comfort. Since she does not want her daughter to suffer similar situation, come under man's devaluation, Bibi, believing that education will liberate her daughter from the grip of hegemony, strives to give her daughter the best education. Bibi withdraws from social groups because she considers them as distractions and waste of limited resources. She scratches the land to send Zilayefa to school because she is aware that education can liberate her from oppression.

She would make sure that I accomplished what she had not. 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 all my needs and even went without sometimes to make sure I got an education. For instance, she expelled herself from the women's group so that she would not be forced to spend money on wrappers for their outings. (8)

In accounting for the relevance of education, Galadanchi Kabir's position is not only persuasive, but also illuminating. He argues that

Education is important for everyone, but is especially significant for girls and women. That is true, only because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. (285)

Bibi's dream of sending her daughter, Zilayefa, to the University from the proceeds she makes from the farmland is shattered as the oil spillage damages and pollutes her only source of livelihood. The narrator captures this vividly:

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. (10)

The oil spillage limns the devastated position of the woman. As her farmland is soaked in crude oil so does her hope and aspiration for her daughter vanish. It then can be argued that the destruction of the land is invariably the destruction of the woman's effort. And this goes on to affect the next generation – her daughter.

Bibi is devastated and traumatised as her only hope of providing a better future for her daughter is destroyed, a future she envisages should be better than her truncated future. Jonas Akung and Azubike Iloeje note that "The

woman symbolizes nature and as man continues to devastate the environment so also is the woman devastated" (80). The trees and plants that protect the environment are chopped down by the bourgeoisie and capitalists whose main interest is to amass wealth for themselves at the expense of the general welfare of the society. The narrator states that: "They were interested in logging timber from the forests in our village and wanted to discuss that possibility with the Amananaowei" (22). The destruction of the trees and plants affect women directly because women relate more with forest products than men. Warren notes that

First, in developing countries women are more dependent than men on tree and forest products. Trees provide five essential elements in these household economies: food, fuel, fodder, products for the home (including building materials, household utensils, gardens, dyes, medicines) and income. 5-6

The exploitation of the female child transcends racial boundaries. Africans and non-Africans exploit the woman because she is vulnerable. Just like the woman is vulnerable and she is exploited, so does the environment. Sunny Awhefeada in "Degraded Environment and Destabilized Women" notes this double exploitation

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 indigenous bourgeoisie. What comes to the fore is the violation and debasement of both land and the violation of women, which often results in unwanted pregnancy, amputates their ambitions, aborts their dreams, and confines them to the abyss of impoverishment. (98)

Secondly, Sergio, a Spanish who left his country to Nigeria to exploit the vegetative environment for his selfish interest, also exploits Zilayefa sexually. Their first meeting in the village where she forms a bond with him had given Zilayefa the hope that he will be the instrument through which she can escape from her village which has been submerged in oil spillage. "...the one who was my ticket out of the village" (28). After abandoning her in the village without saying goodbye, Sergio resurfaces again in Port Harcourt to take advantage of her by getting her pregnant. Zilayefa bares her mind thus

I could not bring Sergio's child into my world. I could not allow him a place in my heart. That would have been foolish. He was a white man, and as far as I was concerned, his home was somewhere other than Nigeria; here was a transient white man with whom I had no future because as I had learnt, his type left when they had to – and without looking back. (173)

Apart from Sergio the Spanish, there are other foreigners such as the Filipinos and the Chinkos who also exploit young girls sexually using gifts and money as baits. "The Filipinos and the *Chinkos* did not give as much money, but

they bought many gifts" (37). The vulnerable woman is not only sexually exploited, but she is also physically brutalized by the white man who oppresses and exploits her doubly by inflicting physical pain on her. The narrator tells us that

Our visitors told of times when they fell into the hands of a crazy whitey who beat them up or pushed objects like bottles into their privates as part of the "fun". It seemed that, sometimes, there were so many unimaginable horrors to get through before the "clients" released the money. Nevertheless, if one were lucky, before they made the mistakes of taking off with one of the crazy whiteys, someone else who had experienced his brutality would tactically stop them and warn them off him. (37-38)

The woman suffers double oppression as she is oppressed by the white men and the local boys. They are either beaten by the foreigners or molested by the local boys.

Occasionally, the local boys would remind the girls that they still had power in town. They would attack the shacks where the girls lived, beat them up, steal their money, and, if their minds had been taken over by the evil spirits in bronze and hard drugs, they would destroy all the property that had gotten in the way of their mission. (38)

Just like the foreigners are out to exploit the Africans, their women and the environment, the African men collaborate with the foreigners to exploit their daughters. Admiral, a 60-year old retired Naval Officer takes undue advantage of Zilayefa, a 17-year old naïve girl who feels that she has found a father figure in Admiral, because she yearns for fatherly love which she never got, because she never knew her father. He lures her with money and gifts and tells her "You do look like you'd be sweet to bite..." (130). He takes away her virginity, the pride of womanhood. "He saw the tears in my eyes after he was done and laughed, "You're a woman now. Don't worry, it gets better" (144). The tears in Zilayefa's eyes symbolizes her helplessness in the hands of a man who has taken advantage of her disadvantaged condition to exploit her. Admiral's action is tantamount to violence against a helpless woman. Grace Etuk in *Violence Against Women* argues that actions such as this amounts to sexual harassment. She notes that sexual harassment

Could take the form of a man using his advantaged position over a woman to get her to submit to having sexual intercourse with him. In this case force is not involved but the woman accepts because of her disadvantaged position. (115)

The exploitative tendency inherent in the man makes Admiral to go incommunicado with the young woman whom he has disflowered and ignited the sexual pleasure in her. She becomes restless and uncomfortable for two weeks when she could not see or hear from her exploiter:

After our first sexual encounter, I did not see Admiral again for almost two weeks.... I waited to receive a message from him and expected his driver every other day. I was torn and worried about the one-sidedness of the relationship. I had to decide that I was ready to deal

with seeing him on his own terms and at his own time. But already I felt jealous of everything and everyone who had his attention. (149)

He relates with her on his own terms, he disregards her emotional feelings because she is a minor who is not up to his social status, but one who can be used and dumped. He sees her when he chooses to and at every point of their meeting, he exploits her sexually, thereby turning her to his sexual slave. Chibueze Orie in *Who is a Woman Being?* notes that

He travels out without telling her. He seems ignorant of the relevance of his presence to her whenever she needs him; he thinks, it seems, that money is and should be everything to her. So, he gives her chunks of money to spend in lieu of his company. He gives more attention to his incessant, crowded political meetings and unending business trips than the time allotted to this girl friend of his. (17)

Zilayefa is too minor to be flaunted before Admiral's business and political associates, so he hides her in his bedroom. He is ashamed of displaying his little girls before his highly placed friends and guests; even though he has the reputation of exploiting young girls. "...he did have a reputation of liking very young girls" (159). He is in the business of exploiting and abandoning young naïve girls. At the knowledge of Zilayefa's pregnancy, he abandons her and moves on to the next unsuspecting victim. Zilayefa laments how "Admiral had become distant, but I was not sure if it was because he had moved on to the next young girl" (173). Confirming Admiral's brutalization of Zilayefa's sexual identity and emotions, Orie notes that "Admiral's relationship with Zilayefa has remained in his terms. It is not a parity-based relationship. And she lacks voice to address this partially arranged relationship" (17).

4. The Stereotyped Woman in Yellow-Yellow

The presence of different kinds of white men in Port Harcourt such as the Portuguese, British, Greek, Syrian, Lebanese, Filipinos, Chinese, Americans and their interaction with Nigerian women produce a generation of "Yellows" in the Niger Delta. Some of these cross-breed children are lucky to be taken care of by their fathers. But Zilayefa, popularly called "Yellow", is among the unfortunate ones who are abandoned by their fathers just like the environment.

Their skin colour makes them more vulnerable as they are seen as products of women of easy virtue who compromised their dignity with white men. They are stereotyped, prejudiced and discriminated against in the society they find themselves. The narrator captures this thus

The rest of us were *born-troways*, rejected by our fathers or, worse, nonexistent to them....I came to understand that people had preconceived notion about others of mixed race – they thought were conceited, promiscuous, undisciplined, and confused...we were products of women of easy virtue who did not have morals to pass on to their children. (74)

The desire to define herself in a society that stereotypes her

pushes her to get entangled with older men because she sees in them father figures. Ifeoma Onyemelukwe in "Search for Lost Identity" notes that an adolescent in search of his or her identity asks the following questions: "Who am I? What am I? How do people see me? How do I see myself? What do I want to become? How can I connect myself to explorations with the opportunities and demands of society" (36). These seem to be the questions that Zilayefa asks herself having been stereotyped in a society she calls her own. In the same vein, Chuma-Udeh argues that "Agary's novel explores and interrogates the trauma of women in the Niger Delta who are wantonly dishonoured by white men who use women as nothing but sexual machines and objects that money can buy" (122).

The society plays a double standard; the girls who are biracial are stigmatized and at the same time flaunted as models that will attract patronage for big businesses. Zilayefa is employed as a hotel attendant in Port Harcourt through the help of Sisi, her guardian whom she lives with. She is made to work as a receptionist because of her beauty in order to attract more customers. She narrates her experience in an intriguingly fascinating manner:

I was used to being referred to as mammy-water. I do not think anyone really believed that I was a follower of the water's mother spirit, but I had one of the qualifying characteristics – my complexion. Mammy-waters were said to be beautiful, light-skinned, and possessed of wily charm. It did not mean much to me, but in a place like the hotel reception desk, where they needed generous tips from guests to augment meager salaries, it was good to have another mammy-water on board. (71)

Zilayefa and her contemporaries are not the first generation of "Yellows" in the novel, Sisi her guardian is one of the older generation of the biracial women. Sisi as a "Yellow" did not suffer stigmatization because she is an entrepreneur who is independent. This corroborates Acholonu's argument in *Motherism* that "in most traditional African societies, the peasantry suffered exploitation by the wealthy and powerful" (51). This shows that Zilayefa and Bibi suffer exploitation and abandonment because they are peasants. The dimensions of the exploitation of the "Yellows" is dependent on their social status. The generation of the "Yellows" are in the following categories.

I found out there were generations of yellows in the Niger Delta area, and each one had a different story. There were the yellows from the 1800s, the days of the Royal Niger Company, later known as the United Africa Company (UAC), which the British had set up to maximize their gains from the palm oil trade.

There were also the yellows from Portuguese traders who remained in the region until the British took full control and pushed them out. In the communities that lined Nigeria's coast, these British and Portuguese interactions were the origins of the old-time yellows such as Sisi.

The next generations were those from the Syrian, Lebanese, and Greek businessmen and sailors, some of whom had married Nigerian women. These yellows knew their fathers; these fathers even sent them overseas for their education. They were the lucky ones. The rest of us were *born-troways*, rejected by our

fathers or, worse, nonexistent to them. Our crop of yellows was full of variety, coloured by the Filipinos, the Chinese, the British, and the Americans who worked in the oil sector. (74)

5. Style

5.1 Symbolism

The title of the text *Yellow-Yellow* symbolizes a degraded, degenerated and abnormal plants and human beings. The environment has been degraded and polluted, thereby making it unproductive for the good of the people. The rivers have been polluted by the crude oil spillage which has killed the fishes that is the source of livelihood for the Niger Delta people. Orie posits that

Yellow is symbolic of the yellowish land washed off of its greenness by oil exploration, oil pollution of land and rivers, a land that is turned infertile, unproductive and bereft of healthy lives: it is only stunted plants that dot on the land! (7)

In the same vein, the cross-breed children are called "Yellow-Yellow" (7). They are stigmatized and prejudiced hence the following names: "African-profits", "born-troways", "ashawo-pickins", "father-unknowns"(171). They are considered as societal misfits, hence their exploitation.

The Greek sailor, Admiral and Sergio, the rich adult males who exploit Bibi, Zilayefa's mother, and Zilayefa respectively, two naïve female children because of their vulnerability, symbolize the multinational oil companies that exploit and pollute the Niger Delta rivers and farmland, thereby rendering the land and the rivers infertile and unproductive.

5.2 Language Use

The use of native dialect reflects the linguistic background of the author. Itang Egbung in *Gender Complementarity in African Literature* argues that the use of native dialect by an African female writer is "a manifestation of her tribe's quest for fulfilment and acceptance globally" (111). Examples of use of native dialect are; "Ere ow' ama bien mo gbein mo daba, owei mo 'yaimo aki, hm hm" (15). Also, the use of pidgin exposes the educational backwardness of the Niger Deltans. "You no go commot for there? You dey look like say na beta tin! Come on, leave dat place!" (4). This is at the scene of the oil spillage where Zilayefa witnesses for the first time in her life where oil polluted and destroyed her mother's farmland thereby rendering her helpless and devastated.

Na de money I come to collect o. I no get money so I dey return de cloth. I neva cut am. Bibi, na wa for you o. We all poor but we dey join hand help each other. De day wey you go need something, make you no come meet us o. (8)

The above discussion between Bibi and the Chairlady of the women group exposes the helplessness, poverty and deprivation of the woman who has been exploited and abandoned with a child to look after on one hand, and the social responsibility she cannot meet up with because her source of livelihood has been polluted.

5.3 Imagery

The Niger Delta is a riverine area where fishing is the main occupation. The writer uses the imagery of a fisherwoman to drive home her message. The image of a fisherwoman as used in the novel exudes happiness and freedom. The river provides a means of livelihood for the people before the pollution. The narrator exposes this nostalgia

My mother told me of the days of her youth when every husband was expected to give his new wife a dugout canoe that he had carved out and crafted himself. The wife would use this canoe to fish, earn a living, and help to feed the family. Those were the days when boys carved out decorative paddles that carried the legends of the Ijaws in every curve. Those were the days when the Ijaw woman could ignore the nature of the Ijaw man because she had a means of earning a living and providing the needs of her children. Those were the days when Ijaw women cooked a fresh pot of soup every day because the rivers were teeming with fish. (39-40).

This oil spillage which has resulted in the pollution of the river and the subsequent extinction of fishes in the river affect women directly because they are very close to nature and nurture. Owhofasa in "Women as Victims" insists that "The women and children in Africa suffer more from environmental degradation because they are not only vulnerable, they are equally the most powerless of the population" (123).

6. Conclusion

This paper has interrogated the interconnectedness between the woman and the environment using the Ecofeminist theory in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*. Ecofeminism is a theory that argues that there is a connection between the manner in which the woman and the environment are treated. These treatments are based on the fact that both are vulnerable. The same manner the woman is exploited, used and abandoned also applies to the environment. In the novel, the girl-child is used and abandoned by men she looks up to as father figures, so also is the environment used by the multinational oil companies who cart away the wealth of the Niger Delta region leaving the indigenous people in abject poverty. Julie Agbasiere in "The Child-Victim" notes that "The adult world in which the child lives in is harsh and violent" (74). The oil spillage also impoverishes the people the more, because their source of livelihood: the farmland and the rivers have been polluted, rendering aquatic life useless. The paper concludes that the stoppage of the deprivation, exploitation and abandonment of the woman and the environment will pave way for the two phenomena to achieve their potentials which will be for the betterment of the society. This point agrees with Orie's position that Kaine Agary is

Agitating that Niger Delta at one hand the women at another, should be paid urgent attention by the governments of the world...a healthy environment is a lead to womanist revival and empowerment; but while women empowerment and feting of femalehood could go without carrying along the revamping of endangered

environment, the rehabilitation of destroyed environment cannot go without the remediating repositioning and empowering value urgency of women beings. (20)

Some aspects of style are also deployed to explicate the deprivation and exploitation of the woman and the environment in the text. The rich old men who exploit the naïve young girl are metaphors for the multinational companies that exploit the vulnerable environment of the Niger Delta. Orié notes that "...underprivileged girl taken advantage of by an affluent love-veteran, Admiral" (19). The exploiters use their privileged positions to oppress the vulnerable thereby achieving their selfish interests.

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