African Woman's Artistic Vision in the Current Environment: An Ecofeminist Study of Kaine Agary's *Yellow –Yellow*

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Abstract

Clearly, in our current environment, there are records of environmental crises in all regions and it appears that we may never return to what we used to call normal. Definitely, environmental change is upon us whether we like it or not. In the field of literature, writers inspire readers to find innovative ways to contemplate about the environment and take actions about the milieu for a healthier world. The aim of this paper is to underscore the engagement and contributions of the African female writer; who has been placed at the margin in African literary scholarship, to the understanding of environment and humanity the African female writer foreground and voice in literary texts. As theoretical framework, the study employs the ecofeminist approach as a viable lens through which we examine environmental effects and concerns in Kaine Agary's *Yellow- Yellow* (2006) within the context of the present social and environmental conditions of the Niger Delta. The study concludes by stating that Agary's novel offers an alternative vision on ecological crisis, reveal strategies used by the author to combat environmental degradation and calls for the increase in women's involvement in the care of the environment for a visionary future in the new normal world.

Keywords: Artistic vision, Ecofeminism, Environment, Kaine Agary, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

In our ever changing ecological world, where environmental issues have affected our wellbeing and nature, we turn to ecofeminism as a worthwhile lens through which we comprehend our current environment and how to save it. Ecofeminism as a desirable literary method can obviously address the environmental crises and challenges of our times; principally for its apparent value in intellectualizing the relationship between gender and nature, as well as nurturing forms of social actions that aim at opposing the environmental concerns of this point in time.

Ecofeminism is a direct mediation in present-day environmental concerns, paying particular attention to the integration of the wellbeing and opinions of women, in a way that establishes how sexual roles and the environment construct variances in the ways men and women act in connection to the environment. Women make evident the importance and relevance of the environment to them and society. Men on their part destroy and plunder much of the beauty of the world.

The patriarchal nature of society, leads to a damaging split between natural surroundings and culture that, perhaps, can only be restored by the feminine predispositions for nurture and the all-inclusive awareness of nature's practices for loving and caring. Usually, women are acknowledged as protective of nature. In most portrayal of women, they are connected with nature and seen to be gentle, tender, loving, caring and beautiful. Their notion about nature is kinship, which should be esteemed, appreciated and preserved. It is important to bear in mind that women and nature are connected in more ways than one. They are linked by such features as biological standing, reproductive function, domination, discrimination and denigration.

Eco feministic perspective to environmental predicament challenges all forms of discrimination and maintains that the cause of environmental deprivation and injustice is a tradition of male control, mistreatment and inequality for women. Woman and nature have become man's possessions. Hence, both women and nature exist to satisfy the necessity of men who exploit them to accomplish their desires. Ecofeminism is a feministic method to environmental consciences. In other words, ecofeminism is a word that connects feminism with ecology. It is ingrained in the critical understanding that environmental predicament is a feminist issue. Thus, eco feminist discourse draws from feminism and ecology to ascertain similar tools of exploitation that affect women and the environment. Accordingly, ecofeminism strives to discover the bases of the subjugation of women and the channels to handle them. It believes in equal rights for all persons and nature. It provides women the tools and conveys women's voices into the environmental drive to increase women's involvement without any discrimination. In this connection, literature plays a valuable role in aiding women to impact the world. Thus, "when women write, they not only create their own stories but by the act of writing they gain authority over their lives" (qtd in Muponde and Maodzwa-Taruvinga 26).

In addition, it inspires and empowers women to tack action about the environs for a better world.

The effect of environmental change has triggered unparalleled calamity in all spheres of life; reflecting on humanity and the after effects of choices made. Of women and nature, it is the ordered nature of our society that elicits oppression. In the field of literature, writers have not only reflected their concern for the environment in their literary works, but have inspired readers to find new ways to think about the environment. But the attention has been on African male writings, while African women writers are placed at the margin. This study thus questions the anthropocentric perspective controlling African literary scholarship by underscoring the contributions of the African female writer to the human and environmental state of the Niger Delta region. Thus, offering a different vision and knowledge on ecological effects of the Niger Delta's collective experience, to create fresh appreciation of the protection of women and the environment.

Julie Newman speaks of the environment as the backdrops of all entities, both artificial and the natural while nature denotes all living beings and their locations in which they live (5). In the context of this study, environment denote the entirety of things on earth together with the physical world while nature denotes to the physical world (lands, jungle, water, animals and so on) and their relations with human beings.

The aim of this paper is to examine ecofeminism in the Niger Delta context, through a close textural reading of Agary's *Yellow -Yellow* to illuminate the domination of women and unveil the devastating effect of men's activities on women and the environment in the new normal world. Close reading pays attention to the "structural importance, any emerging themes, and the view of the world the author offers" (Lassonde 2). As a further source, the paper provides the significance and value of using eco feministic principles as potential for advancing current dialogues and study on the relationships between humans and the natural world. It also evaluates the contributions of Niger Delta female writers to the development of ecofeminism, as well as explores how it adds a new dimension to eco feminist discourse on Agary's novel, *Yellow- Yellow.*

The novel *Yellow- Yellow* brings to the fore the position and connection of the woman who is at the centre of it with nature, subordinated essentially for man's use. *Yellow- Yellow* takes place in an ecologically ravaged Niger Delta society where betray, exploitation, immorality and brutal violence is the order of the day. This is capitalist patriarchy at its nastiest, destroying the environment and damaging the lives of marginalized groups especially females with excessive cruelty and uncertainty. The protagonist, Zilayefa, is an African woman with understanding of the mistreatment of the environment, as closely linked to that the subjugation of women in the society. She hopes for a better society in other to

restore the natural environment and by implication the social and economic sufficiency of women in her region.

In terms of the critique of the novel *Yellow -Yellow*, E.D. Simon perceives the novel as portraying the devastating effects of women and the Niger Delta environment (158). Rob Nixon sees it as "a metaphoric trope of rape" (77). For J.E Akung and A. lloeje, Agary's *Yellow- Yellow* not only examines "the place of women within the political ecology of Nigeria" (75); but also reveals that, "women in the novel have been sexually polluted. The body of the woman symbolizes nature which man has polluted" (75). Ignatius Chukwumah points out that "Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is a literary enterprise whose main thrust is to expose further the socio-economic predicament of the people as well as to explore the debilitating effect of poverty on the feminine psyche" (4). Chukwumah goes on to add that *Yellow- Yellow* is Agary's own way of waging war against the moral decadence that has become a feature of the present day realities in the Niger Delta (4). As Ezechi Onyerionwu points out, "the average Niger Delta youth is potential criminal or prostitute implicating (sic) a most painful kind of loss in the oil war" (qtd in Orie 7).

On his part, Ogaga Okuyade sees *Yellow- Yellow as* "an attempt to give a nuanced view in women entrapped in the Niger Delta turmoil with a more chronology accuracy" (110). Bayo Ogunjimi maintains that Agary depicts her people as totally "exploited" (85). Precious Ona declares that *Yellow- Yellow* represents the suffering as two folds: the women suffer in the hands of the foreign oil expatriate and in the hands of local men who discriminate, subjugate and relegate them to the background (35). He underscores the deplorable predicament of female characters like Zilayefa, who go through the "stigma of being labelled with so many derogatory pseudonyms: African- profit, born troway, ashawo-pickin, Oil Boom, hit and run, father unknown" (111).

Florence Orabueze remarks that Agary's novel epitomizes the degradation of the female's body with that of the domination of nature by man (96). Interestingly, a great number of the critical comments on *Yellow -Yellow* characterize prostitution as a societal depravity that advocates women's powerlessness (Simon 157; Feghabo 322; Janis 326).

Theoretical Framework

The paper employs ecofeminism as the literary approach to study Agary's *Yellow- Yellow*, to understand the significance and contribution of the work to ecological discourse. It discloses the interplay of women and the environment as both subjugated by patriarchal society and reveals that both in their peculiar ways are displaying forms of defiance towards male control.

Ecofeminism, also designated ecological feminism is a branch of feminism that essentially studies the connection between the degradation of the environment and the position of women in the social order. The term ecofeminism is defined as a "branch of feminism" that "examines the connections between women and nature" (Miles 1). Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy delineate the term ecofeminism as a concrete undertaking for social transformation arising out of the tussles of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities (2). Karen Warren sees ecofeminism as "the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of colour, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other" (xi). Ovuoke Owhafasa points out that ecofeminism is a word that gives "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 goes on to add that Cheryll Glotfelty considers 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). The *Oxford Learner Dictionary* 8th edition, defines ecofeminism "as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society" (475).

Accordingly, ecofeminism argues that there is a similarity between women and nature as they both have suffered oppression by a patriarchal society. Eco feminists are certain that women and nature are unified in their fight of existence. The relationship between the subjugation of women and the subjugation of nature are emphasized in order to comprehend why environment is a feminist matter, as well as why feminist matters can be spoken of in connection with environmental matters (Gaard 269). Greg Garrard explains that: "Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppression, arguing that no attempts to liberate women will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (Garrard 132).

Textual Analysis

Agary's *Yellow- Yellow* as a novel with eco feminist intent, deals extensively with how women and nature are both objectified in the interest of men, to ascertain domination and significance as delineated by the patriarchal and capitalistic control. Consequently, Agary's novel is chosen for analysis because it discloses the impacts of power dynamics and ecological destruction of underprivileged women in relation to the environment. It also reveals the connection between female oppression and the abuse of the Niger Delta's natural resources. The novel *Yellow- Yellow*, does not only narrate the events of the environmental crises in the Niger Delta, but also tells the story of a fictive world that sees

the woman's body as simply a sex object that would be mercilessly exploited like the oil cartel exploits the resources of the region.

Agary wants her readers to see the effects of exploitation as not just from the people of the Niger Delta but also from the West who take advantage of less privilege countries for their own benefits, and she presents this by writing about the exploitative effects on the female gender. Agary's *Yellow- Yellow* stands out, not just because it explores issues germane to ecological feministic themes which focus on the environmental degradation, exploitation and injustice suffered by women in the Niger Delta, but also because growing up in the Niger Delta; it is easy to get drawn up in the negative life style perpetrated by male activities, dominance and control. This feminist stance therefore conveys the injustices and the negative consequences faced by Niger Delta region into fresh light.

Among the many eco feminist concerns dealt with in Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, one which stands out in the novel is the adversity of the woman. We are made to see that rural women are often the mainstay of their families and societies; working land and resources. The novel tells us that "Women rowed their canoes farther and farther away to find land for farming" in addition they use their canoes "to fish, earn a living, and help to feed the family" (39). Furthermore, "the women had to walk extra kilometres to get firewood or cultivate and harvest the food now fertilized by their sweat and blood" (40). Implicated here, is that women are dynamic economic providers to their families and they rely exclusively on the environment for subsistence.

To be sure, the effects of the activities of oil companies lead to the impoverishment encountered by women in the Niger Delta. We must recall that an oil spill destroys Bibi, Zilayefa's mother's source of sustenance which is her farmland. Zilayefa informs the reader: "one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village broke and spilled over several hectares of land, my Mother's farm was included" (3). Zilayefa describes the destruction of her mother's farmland: "I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning animals in its path…. And so it was that in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance" (4).Thus, Bibi's aspiration of giving her daughter, Zilayefa, a good education from the earnings she makes from the farmland is shattered. By Zilayefa's own confession: "The day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither" (10).

To escape poverty, Bibi relocates to the city where she becomes the ultimate commodity of exchange of value in the hands of a Greek sailor "whose ship docked briefly in Nigeria" (7). Bibi who moves to Port Harcourt "with visions of instant prosperity" (7) falls prey to

this sex ravenous sailor who just wanted to satisfy his sexual desires. Bibi at age eighteen is deceived, exploited and abandoned by the Greek sailor who left her as a single mother. Zilayefa tells us that: "he (her father) left Port Harcourt without saying goodbye…. he was just gone, leaving behind his planted seed in my mother's belle (7) leaving Bibi to fend for her unborn child unaided.

A girl born into poverty has a far higher chance of undergoing violence and passing this legacy on her offspring. Zilayefa suffers similar fate as her mother. Zilayefa become involved with a foreigner called Sergio who exploits her sexually and disappears the same way her father did, without a word. Zilayefa is distraught because she had seen in Sergio a means of escape "a way out of the village" (23). As she elucidates,"I simply wanted a way out of the village, and if love came with escape, it would be a bonus" (23).

It is a harsh irony that most young girls in the oil rich Niger Delta communities have had their woman self-respect destroyed because of oil exploration activities mostly by male expatriates who have come to work in the region. These men see these young females as lucrative commodities because they cost very little to get. They are helpless and regarded as sex objects by the predatory men who plunder them for sexual pleasure. Many young girls attempting to escape the frustrations resulting from poverty sell their bodies for money to the "Whiteys" (37) foreign oil workers; "in order to send money home to their families" (35). Clearly, sexual exploitation of women stems from a recognition that the sale of the female body mirrors a prevalent belief of sexual violence and objectification of women. It is the masculine dominated culture and economic imbalances that drive women onto the streets. The socio-political needs of male power take power away from women, silence and equated them with a mute Nature.

Poverty among the females in the Niger Delta is a big problem, education is low and unemployment is high. All the young girls want to do is to escape poverty but end up in the hands of sexual predators. The young girls while seeking a better life in the city are dishonoured and polluted in the quest for continued existence. Regrettably, these females in their struggle to make a living off these expatriate whites are desecrated and dehumanised by the white men "who beat them up or pushed objects like bottles into their private parts as part of the fun" (37) to please their depraved clients.

As a result of environmental depravity many of the teenage girls become subjected to several forms of violence and abuse. Many of these young girls are forced into prostitution in their endeavour for survival. However, the hazards of prostitution are numerous. Apart from sexually transmitted diseases, the men abuse them physically. The narrator tells us:

"It seemed that, sometimes, there were so many unimaginable horrors to get through before the clients released the money" (37-38). Evidently, these vulnerable girls thus become victims of domination, exploitation and subjugation by males.

What comes to mind in the context of this study is that exploitation is constructed by the situations of the society today, in that most of those at danger are young adolescents already leaving harsh lives, flung into manipulative hands of men who savour them sexually and thrust them aside. Readers should be made to understand that sexual exploitation often occurs at the very point teenagers are most susceptible; that is to say during their transition from childhood to adulthood. It is at this stage that older men take advantage of them because they are younger, ignorant and naïve.

Girls too are being exploited sexually of their womanhood by indigenous men who like to dominate the women, control and manipulate them. Part of being a man and for the sake of validation, is the act of being sexually dominant. This is evident in the case of "Retired Admiral Kenneth Alaowei Amalayefa" (117), a sixty year old man who is known for luring females into physical pleasure by giving them sums of money to spend. We are told that Admiral "did have a reputation of liking very young girls" (159) and that "his reputation with young girls far, far, preceded him" (162).This is the same man Zilayefa, the protagonist of *Yellow-Yellow* allows herself to be sexually exploited and subjugated in her naivety as she migrates to the city to eke out a living .

Let us get into some of the complications that Zilayefa the "seventeen" (132) year old encountered while dating Admiral. As an old man and a father of two children, "a daughter, Alaere, and a son, Seiyefa" (119); and though divorced, Zilayefa will always be his second choice because his children are his priority. Zilayefa laments: "Admiral had not presented me as someone to be given preferential treatment" (149). The brutal fact is that the age difference between Zilayefa and Admiral enables him influence the relationship dynamics in many ways that put Zilayefa at disadvantage; increase possibility of unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, abandonment, dependency and destruction of her vision and future.

Zilayefa intimates us that Admiral ignores her; he travels without informing her (150). He denies her the loving care and "undivided attention" (158). Reflecting on this, Zilayefa, had hoped to "experience the emotional comfort, attention, and protection" that she "has seen between" Admiral "and Alaere"(145). As Zilayefa takes care to say "Admiral did not have the time to commit to me" (162). She candidly states: "I was involved in something I was not ready for… I found myself drawn to Admiral" (139). We are informed that

Admiral sets the terms of the relationship. The problem with this situation is it brings imbalance of power to the relationship.

The point to be observed is that after their "first sexual encounter" (149) Zilayefa is astonished that Admiral refuses to communicate with her for a number of weeks. Zilayefa discloses: "I waited to receive a message from him… I was torn and worried about the one-sidedness of the relationship. I had decided that I was ready to deal with seeing him on his own terms and at his own time… I felt jealous of everything and everyone who had his attention" (149).

On the level of imbalance in the relationship, Zilayefa goes a little deeper to state that there: "Days when he would meet me in his bedroom, hastily ask me how I was doing, and put a wad of money in my handbag so that he could return to discussion in his leaving room" (158) leaving her abandoned and craving for his company.

On the issue of father figure, Zilayefa's subconscious mind craves a father figure who is able to protect, care, adore and provide her with the affection and financial security she missed at childhood. Recall that Zilayefa lost her father before her birth and it is this inborn desire to have a father figure that exposes her to the old Admiral who coaxes Ziyalefa because of her naivety into the exploitative world of sex. As she declares, "I was hoping the relationship would give me a taste of a close paternal affection that I had never had" (138). Zilayefa is lovesick and asserts, "If I had the luxury of creating a dream father, he would definitely have come out looking like Admiral" (120).

Zilayefa losses her virginity to Admiral hoping that it would give her an exceptional place in his heart (144). But he cares little for that as she soon realises that Admiral only wanted her for sexual gratification. "He saw the tears in my eyes after he was done and laughed, "You're a woman now. Don't worry, it gets better, he rolled off me, and I looked at the spot of blood that marked my initiation into woman hood" (144). The point to be observed is that Admiral has failed immensely in upholding the dignity of Zilayefa by being involved in taking her innocence.

Zilayefa becomes conscious that Admiral has been exploiting her. As she admits: "Those promises of 'I will take care of whatever you need' were falling on the ears of another pretty girl" (173), Zilayefa now accepts the fact that Admiral is concerned only in his sexual pleasure.

What is more, he considers Zilayefa as an article of trade by paying her for her services—for the pleasure of her body. In Zilayefa's words "he reached under his seat and brought out a bundle of money which he handed over to me "for your running around," I was taken aback…I was embarrassed. I was not expecting him to give me money" (139).

By and large, Admiral seduces her, scars her, makes a mess of her life and hinders her from realising herself in the community. When Admiral becomes aware of Zilayefa's pregnancy, he deserts her and moves on to the next naïve prey. Zilayefa expresses grief, "Admiral had become distant, but I was not sure if it was because he had moved on to the next young girl" (173). What is striking is the fact Admiral insisted on her terminating the pregnancy because a man of his social standing cannot afford the social stigma of adolescent pregnancy. Thus he sends Zilayefa to Dr George to help her "get rid of it" (162). What is at issue is that he does not even ask for Zilayefa's opinion on the matter. As she remarks: "there was no room for a discussion. He did not ask whether I wanted to keep the child or not. He did not care, and if I kept the baby, I definitely on my own" (162). As reality dawns on her, she realizes that her prospective wellbeing entails the loss of her first foetus, abandonment by her lover, the physical dangers of abortion and a bleak future.

Conclusion

This paper explored the exploitation of woman in relation to the environment. The study employed the eco feminist approach as a feasible lens through which we scrutinise environmental effects and concerns in Kaine Agary's *Yellow- Yellow* within the context of the present social and environmental conditions of the Niger Delta. The study concludes by stating that Agary's novel offers an alternative vision on ecological crisis, reveal strategies used by the author to combat environmental degradation and calls for the increase in women's involvement in the care of the environment for a visionary future in the new normal world.

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