

## The Lucifer Effect in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores Kaine Agary's "Yellow-Yellow" through the prism of a Luciferian analysis that utilises the novel genre as a means of illuminating the issues of evil, situations and the system. It excavates the author's portrayal of the relationship that exists between evil, situations that engender it and the systems that promote it to explore human experiences in its selected contexts. The work validates the appropriateness of a Luciferian analysis as a tool for unearthing certain stereotypes in the selected novel. In the process, it expands the understanding of a common humanity and enables a transcendence over gender, religious, ethnic and socioeconomic prejudices. It analyses Agary's portrayal of evil and establishes her recognition of the influences of situations and the system on the execution of vicious actions. In addition, it substantiates the claim that no one is above mistakes nor intentional wrongdoing as long as there is sufficient motivation through its excavation of examples from the selected text. Finally, this study argues that, in reverse, given favourable situations and a supportive system, everyone is also capable of doing good. This insight provided by this research about how invaluable situations and systemic powers are to human experiences is meant to sprout interest in further criticism aimed at a better understanding of how good people turn evil.*

**Keywords:** *Humanity; Luciferian; Stereotypes; System; Evil; Good*

### **Introduction**

People who live considerably comfortable lives which are not in tandem with the harsh realities that surround them - provided for and protected, materially and emotionally, by parents or some such guardian - are usually oblivious of the rationale behind most decisions and actions taken by people who do not. For this reason, they are sometimes judgemental of other people who they see living lives which do not conform to their sanctimonious moral codes. The belief is that nothing but ardent recalcitrance and unwillingness to change could have made these people who they are. They notice only the tremendously wrong decisions and the consequent actions which pervade their surroundings and wonder why these people do not see that what they do is wrong, averse from morality and therefore deserving of repentance and change.

It is quite easy to be a judge over the lives of others when theirs is relatively better because of parental support, a steady income and a general sense of financial, social, emotional and thus psychological security - free from desperate situations. There comes a change in the approach to life after an individual loses some of the privileges mentioned above. The novel perspective leads to questioning and even a reproach of the perspective from which they had hitherto acted as adjudicators over other people's moral conducts. These changes are infrequent but when they do occur, it is noticeable that things that would have been referred to as dishonest are things that are constantly contemplated and one is able to avoid implementing them by sheer serendipity. The previously unconsidered options become the new common sense. The need to stay alive, to them, justifies these thoughts and their consequent actions overrides every sense of morality.

One wonders, then, if it is easy to become evil spontaneously owing to a brief period of exposure, why it would not be the natural option for other people who have had to live life through more desperate circumstances with minimal or no support from external sources, that is, for people whose "consciences" are dead. It becomes altogether excessive, therefore, when people insist upon the guilt of other people without probing further into the causative circumstances and what part the system has had to play in the affair. Philip Zimbardo (2007: x) reports the "unwillingness to accept any of the many mitigating circumstances [being] detailed" which "contributed

to [the] abusive behavior and should have reduced [the] harsh [criticism of erring individuals]. The prosecutor and judge refused to consider any idea that situational forces could influence individual behavior. There was the standard individualism conception that is shared by most people in [the Western] culture. It is the idea that the fault was entirely 'dispositional'" (x). In fact, it is incredible to many that the decisions to do evil - steal, kill and destroy - can be outside their power.

The Luciferian analysis is an attempt at understanding how good people turn evil. It is derived from the ideas in *The Lucifer Effect* (2007) where Philip Zimbardo proposes a socio-psychological approach to understanding how a person's behavior is affected by her or his environment. Even though it has become general knowledge that a person's environment greatly influences a person's outlook on life and response to situations, Zimbardo suggests that the inquiry into deviant behavior should not be limited to a person's situations but extended to the system which creates such situations.

The working premise of any Luciferian analysis of literature or any cultural product should be that the intangible and the material affect each other. This means, in other words, that the psychological and socioeconomic realities of a person or a group are in a symbiotic relationship. A person's psychology, though directly influenced by one's family, is a product of a larger society, and how such a person reacts affects the larger society, which in turn affects the individual concerned and thus the cycle continues ad infinitum. This means, then, that a person's actions are influenced by a person's thoughts, which have first been acted upon by various other thoughts, and actions that have formed a person's personality over time.

The most intriguing finding of this study is that no matter how strongly a person feels about her or his personal identity, it can change in the spur of the moment or over time without them knowing it. Consequently, this relationship which exists between persons and situations, thus requires a multiplicity of views which, it should be stated, are very subjective and so adds, with every new angle, a fresh insight into why people change for better or worse. A Luciferian analysis is meant to reveal how a person's reason for committing crime or being evil is simply a response to humanity's basic instincts to stay alive and to progress.

Zimbardo defines evil as consistently "*intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others — or using one's authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf.* In short, it is 'knowing better but doing worse'" (5). If a person decides to impinge upon the rights of others, especially by taking away their property or causing them harm (without justification), generally, such acts, criminal or not, are considered evil across board, whatever be the name given. By the standard of that definition, it seems very clear that evil is invariably committed by every human being. Nevertheless, some things are easy to overlook and some others are not, especially those perpetrated by the socio-political system since it does not seem tangible or even immediately noticeable.

The system is an overhanging and ever-present force which pervades every stage of community life. It is noticeable in the authorities of known establishments-domestic, socioeconomic and even spiritual. Children have these systemic powers residing in their spiritual leaders in churches, mosques or wherever else; in teachers at school, and in elders and peers on the playground. As the child matures, the system reaches further and claims the source and amount of income, and so forth. Zimbardo comments on his childhood saying,

For us kid's systemic power resided in the big bad janitors who kicked you off their stoops and the heartless landlords who could evict whole families by getting the authorities to cart their belongings onto the street for failure to pay the rent. I still feel for their public shame. But our worst enemy was the police, who would swoop down on us as we played stickball in the streets (with a broomstick bat and Spalding rubber ball). Without offering any reason, they would confiscate our stickball bats and force us to stop playing in the street.  
(xi)

It is clear, then, that the reference to the system is not at all meant singularly for those with political powers. The word "system" refers to everyone who has the power to influence others.

Zimbardo opines that those who are involved are "the directors, scriptwriters, and stage managers who made this tragic play

possible", the "'administrative evil,' that constitutes the foundation of complicity of the chain of political and military command in these abuses and tortures" (381). Furthermore, he insists that this tyranny exists in the private and public sectors because they operate within a legal, rather than an ethical framework and as such they are able to look with indifference as other people suffer and die because they are meant to be rational, not emotional and their actions are profit-driven not humanistic, "following cold rationality for achieving the goals of their ideology, a master plan, a cost-benefit equation, or the bottom line of profit. Under those circumstances, their ends always justify efficient means." (381,382)

Agary, giving a very incisive account of the narrator of the eponymous *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), details how a person could metamorphose as a response to the frustration faced as a result of perpetual psychological, emotional and socioeconomic strains. She gives the reader a number of true-to-life characters with perhaps every major character being possessed of very human necessities and weaknesses which too often call for relief. Major characters in the novel are bestowed with both selfless and selfish traits. The harsh reality for these characters is that they live surrounded by situations which arouse their brash aspects every so often.

The narrator explains that she "had to come up with something to do to stay alive" (35). This narrator has a "mother, who had been my protector, my shield, and who would have been, if she could breathe for me, my life support" (41). She clearly states that her mother had given up every social activity in an absolute "self-expulsion from all social groups" (8) so that she would be able to "feed us and pay my school fees" with the proceeds from her farming and fishing. "Unlike other parents who kept their children busy," the narrator goes on to say, "my mother would not allow me to do too many chores around the house or to follow her into the bush for firewood and for other things that people went into the bush for." (9). As a result, the narrator insists that "[e]ven though I grew up in the village... there were many things about bush survival that I did not know about and did not think I wanted to experience just then" (27).

With such a generous mother, the reader would be left to question the rationale behind the narrator's desire "to come up with something to do to stay alive." What could it be that she felt was threatening her life? One answer would be the same reasons which

made the narrator's mother to leave the village for where she may never have returned from had she not gotten pregnant with Zilayefa, the narrator, for a Greek man who had absconded - militancy, environmental degradation, poor educational facilities and equipment and a general lack of amenities. The Niger-Delta region of Nigeria is a place which even in recent times is infamous for its bouts with the government and oil companies. This unrest is believed to be the result of "how the oil companies had destroyed our Niger Delta with impunity... how the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others" (9). It is reputed to be a place where

...ears still rang from maternal wails piercing the foggy days when mothers mourned a child lost to sickness or to the deceptively calm waters that lay hungry below the stilt latrines, waiting to swallow the children whose unsteady feet betrayed them before they had learnt to swim... [where] I bear the pains like a hundred razor blades slashing my private part because the river water that washed it was the same water that received the waste rejected by my body in its attempt to cleanse itself[.] The water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines that moved the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank. (Agary 39)

The sullen conditions of their people is what has made people venture into advocacy for the cause of these people. Some of the most enlightened who have fought for the cause through intellectual means and have been killed even without just cause are such men as "Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with nine other Ogonis, for inciting an insurrection... and [...] Isaac Adaka Boro [who] had [died] nearly thirty years before him" (34). With such a long-lasting history of oppressive forces constantly flouted with impunity, it is little wonder why young men are being driven to violence, "[s]ome of them join[ing] the boys from other villages to kidnap oil company executives or bar oil company workers from doing their work" (9-10). They yell phrases like "'aluta *continua*' at the slightest provocation" (34) and "Dulcis et Decorum est pro patria mori" a

phrase first attributed to Horace and later adopted by Wilfred Owen as the title of his poem (1920). "Mostly they were successful, but sometimes one or two of our boys failed to return from a mission. The word around the village was that the police had caught and killed them , but we would never hear about it on the radio " (Agary 10).

The fact that these young men's deaths and/or arraignments were not reported by the same radio stations that publicized the numerous scholarships that the oil companies awarded but that the recipients were unable to obtain—the same radio stations that reported on horrific kidnappings, pipeline vandalism, and horrifying murders committed by extremist organizations—is evidence of the existence of an oppressive system. This system creates holes, lets people fall through them, then washes its hands and clears its conscience. For instance, it is the system that facilitates four or five years in the university, which were peppered with teachers' strikes, student demonstrations, and shutdowns, these students emerged with bachelor's degrees that they would only use for the one year of mandatory National Youth Service Corps as teachers in a rural school. After that, they would end up in banks; marching the halls of government agencies looking for government contracts (32).

It is the same system which causes the story to always be "the same: a few marks short of the cut-off point and your life choices [become] severely limited" (33). In such a system, the only available options are militancy, prostitution, farming, and domestic work, learning a trade and venturing into married life. A number of these option seem innocent, desirable and even praiseworthy on the surface until the circumstances which surround them are revealed. The seemingly obviously immoral options also seem just that way - immoral, until one becomes properly acquainted with the reasons for them.

Seeing figures such as Saro-Wiwa and Boro as icons of patriotism and with a little misguided helpfulness from peer pressure, it becomes easier to see how militancy becomes a natural option. By misguided helpfulness, this study refers to a

set of dynamic psychological processes [...] that can induce good people to do evil, among them deindividuation, obedience to authority, passivity in the face of threats, self-justification, and rationalization. Dehumanization is one of the central processes in the

transformation of ordinary, normal people into indifferent or even wanton perpetrators of evil. Dehumanization is like a cortical cataract that clouds one's thinking and fosters the perception that other people are less than human. It makes some people come to see those others as enemies deserving of torment, torture, and annihilation. (xii)

Deindividuation is one way through which a person loses his or her reason to do good. It confers on a person a sense of anonymity. There are many ways in which this phenomenon presents itself but a salient example is in the mob psychology. When a person acts in isolation, the person has his or her faculties complete and can make decisions which concern him or her but when the person joins a group, he/she begins to act out the desires of that group because he/she is no longer alone but part of what Napoleon Hill (1928) describes as "a mind that is developed through the harmonious co-operation of two or more people who ally themselves for the purpose of accomplishing any given task" (21). The person begins to feel like nothing she or he does can be noticed. Zimbardo posits that:

You may recognize this process in literature as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. When all members of a group of individuals are in a deindividuated state, their mental functioning changes: they live in an expanded-present moment that makes past and future distant and irrelevant. Feelings dominate reason, and action dominates reflection. In such a state, the usual cognitive and motivational processes that steer their behavior in socially desirable paths no longer guide people. Instead, their Apollonian rationality and sense of order yield to Dionysian excess and even chaos. Then it becomes as easy to make war as to make love, without considering the consequences. (219)

Only a cursory glance through and one would encounter a series of individuals who lose themselves in a group image. Among them are the militant group members who consider themselves to be saviours who have taken it upon themselves to bring glory to their people by "taking interest in our plight and until justice, as they saw it, prevailed" (Agary 9) Militants are clearly not the ones who alone hide under a communal identity; there are the "visitors" who "arrived at the riverbank or at the corner of town where... two or three people



who were delighted to see them would recognise them. One of these people would then run ahead to announce to the village that the visitor had arrived... Everyone in the visitor's family scurried to make them comfortable" (Agary 36). Every girl was envious of such a life of fanfare and jubilation.

Prostitution has in fact become a laudable option from the look of things. This is conceivable based on the evidence provided by the narrator. Firstly, there is the acceptance of these "visitors" by family members who, it can be inferred, are privy and even in support of their daughters' decisions. If this claim is contended with, there is further proof. Returning from the city, whichever it may be, these visitors bring back their bounty among which fabulous tales are included. These tales are not only of good but also of evil which in some ways is material in that it made

[t]heir face looked tight like they spent all day, as those of us in the village did, with their heads under a pot, blowing into the embers of firewood to keep the fire going. Some of them came back with skin that looked like someone had touched wet coal and rubbed it over them tauntingly — some here, some there. Their faces, hands, legs, and feet were yellow, though some parts had big smudges of black. Their skin had an acrid smell... (Agary 35)

Some were not as obvious but the tales were related of how

\*Girls did anything to get a whitey. If it meant travelling deep into the bushes of Isoko land to get a love potion, then it had to be so. If it meant putting a scar on another girl's face for daring to swoop in on the whitey they discovered and laid claims to first, then they were prepared for the battle. Whatever it took, they did. [Even when] visitors told of times when they fell into the hands of a crazy whitey who beat them up or pushed objects like broken bottles into their private parts as part of the "fun" (37).

All these forewarnings notwithstanding, the glory of it all still goads these women into ardent desires to escape to "a place like Bonny, the base of expatriates working for oil companies, and sell [their] bodies

to a whitey... in order to send money to their families" (Agary 35). Since the youth are the leaders of tomorrow, it plays to logic that these money hungry youths have grown into welcoming mothers who enjoy the fruit of their children's conquests. Another factor one may impute is the patriarchal system of their society. It is a system that needs questioning as to its rating of its women especially within the marriage institution. The narrator reports that

Nowadays, the men were even more oppressive than the women alive could remember. They demanded a healthy meal when they were hungry, disregarding the fact that the women had to walk extra kilometres to get firewood or cultivate and harvest the food now fertilized by their sweat and blood. Cobwebs would fill the during the time that passed before the men contributed to the feeding expenses of the household.

The men claimed that, according to tradition, it was their exclusive right to make all the decisions inside and outside the home... " If we allowed women free access to these meetings," they reasoned, "where would it end? The next thing they would want to do is mount their men in the bedroom...

The tension and conflicts in the village borne out of frustration were familiar to me. Some women walked around deaf in one ear because they had dared to question their husband's wisdom in spending the last kobo in the house on booze. Women with distended bellies that resemble pregnancies, caused by uterine fibroids, were confined to their rooms because a diviner had investigated and confirmed them to be witches. (Agary 40)

There is someone who managed a clean getaway from these horrors mentioned who still engaged up in a couple of reckless sexual experiences. These are the same wrongs which this one person also committed. This person is the narrator herself, Zilayefa. As earlier noted there are a number of cultures around the world whose moral codes vary vastly hence this work should have decided to limit its judgement to universally accepted wrongs but for the geographical

climes. The wrong committed in the case of the prostitution of the women in Yellow-Yellow, however, is not their sexual encounters since it is consensual but the fact that they killed the foetuses (little human babies) which were formed as a result of their acts.

Based on Zilayefa's mother's good standing with the local pastor, the general dignity in the family name and Zilayefa's educational successes, she was referred to Sisi, a wealthy middle-aged woman in the city of Port Harcourt. While in the city of Port Harcourt, she is committed into the care of Lolo who to Yellow exudes "an air of confidence", about whom she is "awestruck... [and] believe[s] her poise, confidence, and youthful radiance were attainable" (Agary 56). Putting Lolo forward as a role model, Yellow begins her journey in the big city and several other big cities which ends her up on the bathroom floor "curled up in the foetal position" (Agary 178), for the second time, on the cold tile floor after being rejected by one of the men on whom she had projected her father figure.

From the early parts of the narrative, the narrator has expressed frustrations with her station in life and sought hard for relief. One would begin to think that her decision to be wayward is a result of her material strains alone, like those of her peers, but a closer look would reveal that she has other demons to exorcise. Her name is Yellow, which "is what most people in my village called me because of my complexion, the product of a Greek father and an Ijaw mother" (Agary 7). In the excerpt above the narrator begins to give her genealogical background and introduces the reader to the major cause of her anxieties which is that her

father was a sailor whose ship docked briefly in Nigeria about one year before I was born. After months at sea, he was just 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 visions of instant prosperity... For the weeks that he was in Port Harcourt, she was in heaven. She believed that she had found her life partner and this man would take care of her... Instead, he left Port Harcourt without saying good-bye. (7).

From the passage above, it would appear that like many other girls in her community Yellow chooses to start sleeping with men in the city because of her need for money. Even though this might be a reason, it is a minor one. The main reason for Zilayefa's promiscuity is revealed over time through her introspection, particularly in the opening sections of the story. She justifies her actions by pointing to the injustices in the Niger Delta, and she is not incorrect, since the consequences for her, is more psychological than material in nature.

Zilayefa's abandonment by her father sets the scene for an uncontrollable desire for a replacement. The story makes it clear that her mother has always tried to fill that position in her life by providing for and making life decisions for her. These are roles that are stereotypically expected in this society to be performed by a father. The loss of her father, as she imagines him, constantly taunts her, such that even when her best friend in the city attempts to comfort her by using herself as an example poor parentage, she tells the best friend "that she, at least, had the luxury of knowing both her parents"(12). Being uneasy and in a hurry to find out a fitting father figure, everything around her seems to irritate her when she is in the village. She is constantly lamenting her plight. From as early as chapter two, she begins her rant about "[t]he sameness of life in the village" and how it "would kill me if I did not escape" (Agary 8). Of course, part of that sameness is the narrator's mother's persistent projection of her fears on the narrator. Zilayefa is constantly reminded how everything her mother has done from the moment she "went back to her village to face the shame of being an unwed mother with nothing but dreams" is so that "[s]he would make sure that I accomplished what she had not" (8). [I]t was almost as though she was obsessed, consumed by the idea that my education would save me from what I had yet to understand and what she could not explain to me. Perchance in saving me, she hoped to save herself "(9).

"She said it with such conviction and made so many sacrifices to make sure that I went to school that I believed it to be true" (9) says the narrator. By that she means that she has been acculturated into the belief that her education is of paramount importance and none else should override it because "[i]n her dreams, I would go on to university and study a subject that would get me a good job with enough income to take care of myself" (10) even if "I had no clue

what I wanted to study. Not that it would have mattered, because the universities, if any were interested in me, would decide what I was going to study, based on the results result of my examination" (31).

She even denies the possibility of trying to overcompensate for a loss by saying, "I cannot say that I ever really longed for my father; in fact, I barely thought of him at all" (19). This is a clear sign of repression, especially because of her mother's refusal to speak of him. Having learnt to stop asking questions verbally, she begins to, through her actions and decisions, search for him in everything that is not representative of her mother. She comes to believe that everything restrictive has her mother emblazoned thereon and, were her father alive, he would have given her the freedom she desires. From this perspective, it becomes obvious that her clamour for freedom is only a search for her father, disguised.

This point is proven by her choice in men. She does not even attempt to delude herself into believing that her choices are little more than a move to project her father figure onto older men. She first identifies Sergio as a man across the room, who she does not know how she had previously missed because his complexion stands out just as hers does in that room... She wonders if he was Greek:

I cannot say I ever really longed for my father; in fact, I barely thought of him at all... I did not care for him one way or another, but seeing this man brought me thoughts of my father. Where was he? Did he ever come back to Nigeria? Did he ever come back to Nigeria? (19).

Sergio is not the only one on whom she projects the image of her father. In the city, she also meets a wealthy retired Admiral of the Nigerian Navy who owns businesses. From the start, she desires a kind of father-daughter relationship with him which does not end quite as planned. She sees in him an opportunity for an active reversal, that is, an opportunity to alter the effects of the wounds left by her father hence she goes into a relationship which causes her troubles that climax in the sprawled blood of her unborn child on the bathroom floor — she aborts her baby.

### **Conclusion**

Using the works of an author whose work is unquestionably one of the most controversial amongst contemporary Nigerian novelists, and assessing the texts for the presence of evil and its situational and systemic influences, this paper achieves its goal of emphasizing the importance of situations and the significance of the system on collective and individual character behaviors. This is relevant because it demonstrates that writers with similar storytelling directions may also face this type of criticism. This paper's claim is that the Luciferian approach to the investigation of literary works across various genres, authors, and even spatial origins is valid because it arouses interest in the otherwise forsaken limitations of the human race, which are constantly presented within works of literature. It is hoped that this paper will spark enough interest in additional investigations of literary texts and other cultural goods to determine the impact of socioeconomic and domestic relationships on characters' mental organization in narrative.

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