

# Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*: A Study in Ecocriticism

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the relationship between ecology and literature, focusing on Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. The novel explores the socio-cultural effects of oil exploration and exploitation on the ecology. It examines the effects of coastal communities in contact with the sea in the Niger-Delta. Some of these include what Kaine Agary calls 'Born troway', 'African profits', 'Father-unknown', 'Ashawo pickin'. Zilayefa the heroine of the novel is a product of one of such contacts. The bulk of some of these contacts makes up the tendency toward criminality in the Niger-Delta region in addition to poor leadership at all levels of governance. The paper deals with the political ecology of Nigeria and examines the place of women within that ecology. It is our position and the view of this paper that environmental pollution translates to moral pollution. Women in this novel have been sexually polluted. The body of the woman symbolizes nature which man has polluted. All these issues are the basic concerns, which this paper interrogates.*

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Ecology, Pollution, Nigerian Novel

The concern of environmentalists about the future of our environment, culture, politics and economy has spurred researchers and critics alike to delve into studies promoting our environment, culture and politics. These could have multiplier effects that would promote good living, governance and security. Ecocritics have sought to see the role played by environmental debates in solving environmental crises. Cheryl Glotfelty (1996:5) captures these concerns:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear to see more clearly a debate, which seems to be taking place, often part concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis.

Most of these cultural spaces include literature and politics, both of which are inter-related in the sphere of this discourse on environment. Politics over time has been the raw material, which the literary artist has employed in his creative enterprise. Feminist critics have argued that there is a relationship between nature and man as these critics have always sought to distinguish between sex and gender. According to Greg Garrard (2004:5):

Feminist critics have distinguished between sex which is a biological category, and gender which is a social construction and shown how a male-centred world-view and social order have tried to legitimise changing gender constructions by referring them back to a supposedly fixed 'natural' sexual identity... this strategy provides opportunities for women to escape repressive stereotypes, it also represents a marked prioritization of the claims of culture over those of nature.

Garrard's position shows in a way how nature and literature could be culturally constructed.

Literature has interrogated the role of government policies on the environment, and the extent to which these policies affect the general well-being of the people. The chemicals pumped into the environment have risen to a highly toxic level. Oil spillage has adversely affected aquatic life, wild life and flora. These in turn have affected the economic life of the Niger-Delta people especially in the area of farming and fishing. The literary artist now takes the position of an environmental activist championing the cause to bring positive change to his environment.

In his view, Cheryll Glotfelty (1996: xix) holds that “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it”. This connection in turn explains the role played by literature in the ecology of man. Ecocriticism, according to him becomes “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (xxx).

The crisis in our environment has reached frightful proportions and ecocritics are now demanding that we all rise and protect the environment. In the literary sector, nature is seen not only as a stage where the human story is acted upon, but also as a dramatic personae in itself, for many environmental factors have shaped our human actions. The closer an author is to nature, the denser the imagery he draws from it. The Caribbean writers because of their close link with the sea tend to draw their metaphors from the sea to illuminate and enrich their works.

Ecocritics are seeking ways in which man can work towards sustaining the environment and protecting it from damage. William Ruekert (1996:107) advises that keeping human community from destroying the natural community is in itself a self-destructive exercise. However, he holds that what is important “is to find the grounds, upon which the two communities-the human, the natural-can coexist, cooperate and flourish.” This mutual relationship will help develop and promote the state economy. An economy that depends solely on oil without developing the areas which produces it brings untold hardship on the people. Poor management of the ecological resources by the political class affects people. In whatever dimension we perceive this, nature and man are inter-dependent. The continuous pumping into the atmosphere of toxic fumes or material has contributed to the depletion of the ozone layer, the consequences of which is the global warming that the world is experiencing now.

In the same vein, Carolyn Merchant (1993: xix) argues that environmentalists have been warning of the irreversible consequences of the “continuous environmental exploitation”. According to her, this warning necessitates or calls for the development of “ecological ethics” which emphasize the interconnectedness between people and

nature” (xix). She likens the domination of nature by men to the male domination of the female. In her view, women must work with the men to maintain environmental harmony and integrity. The business of ecocriticism has been to see how man can live within the spheres of nature. Man cannot continue to exploit nature without replenishing her. Merchant further opines that nature is “the mother of mankind and needs to be liberated” from the exploitative tendency of man. Her basis is that there is inter-connectedness between ecology and women, and ecocriticism, as ecological study would not endorse the continued domination of nature and women by man. She then argues that the relationship between ecology and woman is not a replacement of feminism but demonstrates the need to reconceptualise the existing theories of gender studies.

Neil Evernden (1992: 3) on the other hand holds that “there is a widespread sense that the whole of nature has become imperilled through profligate waste and human mismanagement.” There is therefore the need to develop ecological programmers for social actions, which would promote ecological ethics and enhance good mutual value for life.

It follows that ecocriticism is “an avowedly political mode of analysis” (Garrard3). This mode of analysis tends to advocate and “seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns” (Garrard 3). The social concern of ecocriticism is with the moral pollution, which now pervades social life thereby leading to moral contamination. If not properly checked, “our future well-being will be imperiled and our children will inhabit a blighted planet” (Evernden).

Nurmal Selvonny and Alex Rayson (2009: xxx) hold that issues like “Environmental justice or ecological justice? Animal rights show that humans are territorial animals like other animals and should have the same rights.” They argue that ecocriticism is the application of holistic concepts in ecological study.

Walk Jones (2009: 263) on the other hand traces the origin of ecocriticism to the Garden of Eden. According to her, the serpent is seen as a boundary-transgressing monster that blurs the boundary between God and nature, and humanity and nature. She argues that

with the help of the snake, “humanity acquires discernment to fulfil their pre-ordained vocation, serve and protect the earth.” Jones’ position is that ecological study began at the Garden of Eden.

*Yellow-Yellow* examines the life of the heroine, Zilayefa, and the harsh realities of the Niger-Delta. The story begins with the oil spillage, which has become a recurrent problem in the region. The spillage causes a great deal of damage to the people’s source of sustenance. Zilayefa says, “in a single day my mother lost her main source of sustenance’ (4). The story continues as the narrator who is Zilayefa tells the story as an insider. She takes us through the circumstances of her birth and the ordeal of her mother, Bibi, taking care of her as a single parent. Her father, a Greek sailor had docked his ship at Port Harcourt, met her mother, then eighteen, and had a brief relationship with her which resulted in a pregnancy. Just when the ship sailed off and Bibi returned to the village to face life, she sacrifices a lot to bring up Zilayefa. She is stranded, constrained to take care of a child she has made with a man who sails away into the horizon.

The village later becomes a cage for Zilayefa who desires to escape to the city for a change. Though she longs for an escape, how to do it is another task she must work out. The opportunity comes when she meets Sergio, whom she sees as the route out of the village. The plan fails as Sergio leaves the village without notice. The narrative also provides an insight into the decay and rot in the ivory tower, the horrors of military dictatorship and the attempt by General Abacha to perpetuate himself in power.

Zilayefa eventually makes it to the city armed with a note from Rev. Ikechukwu. She meets Madam George (Sisi) and Lolo. They accept her as one of their own. At this point, the narrative focuses on the contrast between life in the city and life in the village. Zilayefa gets a job as a receptionist in a hotel, where she meets Emem, who like her is a victim of a ‘hit-and-run’ father. While in the city, she takes a deeper look at the political ecology of Nigeria, bedevilled with corruption. Allusion is made to Abacha’s regime with its clamp down on the opposition and the failure of the judiciary to give justice.

The last part of the story examines Zilayefa's relationship with Admiral. She accepts the relationship with Admiral who is over sixty not just for the money, but also for fatherly love. Admiral violated and polluted her. She becomes pregnant, but Admiral suggested abortion as he abandons her. She aborts the pregnancy and hopes that if she makes it, it will be a renaissance for her, a hope that seems to suggest the author's vision that there is still hope for the Niger-Delta.

Kaine Agary seeks to use her novel to mobilize and educate the public on the effects of environmental degradation on the ecology. She focuses her searchlight specifically on oil exploration and its effects on the ecology:

...one of the crude oil pipes that ran through any village broke and spilled oil over several hectares of land, my mother's farm included... it turned out some of them have lost their farmland.. 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 its viscous oil... And so it was that, in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance... the village had gradually lost, year after year, the creatures of the rivers to oil spill, acid rain, gas flares... (3 – 4).

This passage paints a vivid picture of the ecological damages caused by oil spillage, which affects both man and the environment. The irony of oil exploitation is that the people who own the oil do not benefit from the proceeds of oil exploration. They live in squalor in slums and nothing is done to alleviate the suffering caused by the damage to their environment. On the contrary those who do not own this oil feed fat on oil proceeds “...the oil companies have destroyed our Niger-Delta with impunity... the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others” (9). Commenting on this negative attitude Joseph Ushie (2006:8) argues that:

... 50 years of crude oil exploration and exploitation has rather left the Niger-Delta environment completely vandalized, its once fertile land soaked in

and sterilized by crude oil, its people living in thatch and mud shacks, its rivers, streams and creeks poisoned, its fishes murdered, its people... left without drinkable water, left without electricity supply, left without security, left without job, left without health facilities... And worse... the region live in the midst of oil spillages and round-the-clock gas flares.

Ushie's position explains that oil exploration in Nigeria contributes more to global warming than the whole world put together, and all these cause ecological damage which has reduced the region to a 'wasteland'. From what we see as the setting tone, the novel has become a discursive site where issues about the ecology and the political ecology of Nigerian are carried out. Agary makes a bold attempt at re-territorializing the Niger-Delta cause in a manner that valorizes their history.

In another instance, Agary notes that it is not only oil spillage that causes ecological damage, but also industrial solvents washed into the river:

How many more times could I bear the pains like a hundred razor blades slashing my private part because the river 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 escape from the pipelines ( *Yellow* 39).

This deeply affects the economic lives of the people and brings nostalgia. "Farming and fishing the occupation that had sustained my mother... no longer provide gain... women rowed their canoes farther and farther away to find land for farming" (39). As a result, Zilayefa longs for the old days before the advent of oil exploration "the days I spent with my mother in her farm before oil finally swallowed it up" (41). Since farming and fishing are the main sources of sustenance of the people, the destruction of these means leaves them stranded without any alternative means of livelihood.

For juxtaposition, Agary paints an ecological picture placed side by side with sites destroyed by oil exploration and sites left for romantic relationship. For instance Zilayefa meets Sergio and begins a romantic relationship “we found a spot about two hundred metres away from the house and sat under a tree to watch the sunset, we could see the orange sun fading away into the sky” (21 – 2).

This shows a drastic move away from the horrors they have been experiencing in the village. The spot was “...the only place where we could do whatever we wanted without adults disturbing us... it was our escape from the village, from the conflict, the violence and the depression that characterized our village more and more”(24). This ecological serenity is what Agary advocates for: “I was wearing my powder-blue dress, and the evening air brushed my face and whispered through the clothes. The air, moving freely through my dress and caressing my body underneath, was intoxicating” (25). These expressions are carefully chosen for this romantic moment; “Sergio’s... pink lips were... the colour of red hibiscus” (26). She describes the environment “we listened to the river, the trees, the birds and to each other’s breathing, and we talked about the river, the trees, the birds, the land and all that came from it” (27)

Zilayefa’s trip to Lagos Bar Beach with Lolo and Kamal, and other friends offers the narrator another opportunity to paint another picture of romantic ecology which contrast with life in the village:

the cool saltwater from the ocean touched our faces  
and the moon and the stars called on us from above.  
All we needed, if we were going to spend the night at  
the beach, were mats to spread out on the sand, where  
we would lie until the morning sun chased away the  
hospitable night sky (92).

Zilayefa wished she could remain in this romantic mood for a longer time “I watched the couples disappear behind rocks and I wished that I too had someone I could stroll away with, hand in hand” (94). She remembers Sergio but he is a mirage; and later she thinks of Admiral, but he too is a mirage.



The Niger Delta relationship with the sea has dual metaphors. It gives life and also takes life. The sea brings people from other races to the Niger-Delta. The people who come as sailors or expatriate oil workers become the lot of the people.

Zilayefa's father is a Greek whom she does not know. He only met her mother, had an affair with her, planted the seed in her womb and vanished. Zilayefa, a product of mixed races, has to battle with the existential problem. This earns her the name "Yellow-Yellow." Describing Emem her friend, she says, "Emem's mother, like me, was a product of a hit-and-run with a Portuguese trader" (73). She further explains that there are several generations of "Yellows in the Niger-Delta but what is important is that each has its own story" (73). Some of these Yellows knew their fathers but Zilayefa's generation does not know their fathers:

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 Filipinos, the Chinese, the British, and the Americans, who worked in the oil sector (74).

All these are as a result of the people's contact with the sea. The after effect is the creation of the yellows and the stigma associated with it "There was even much less regard for "born troways" such as me" (74) and "We were products of women of easy virtue who did not have morals to pass on to their children" (74). Because of discontent among members of mixed races in the region, some vent their anger on the system. This is coupled with the absence of amenities and jobs in the area. The women, who are the worst hit, resort to prostitution. Zilayefa muses:

I could find my way to a place like Bonny, the base of expatriates working for the oil companies, and sell my body to a whitey. Some girls from my town did that in order to send money home to their families (35).

Agary shows how these women have been polluted by men especially the 'Whiteys', some of whom further degrade the female by allowing their dogs to sleep with these women. All the women in this novel are

polluted in one way or the other. Bibi, Zilayefa's mother is polluted by her Greek sailor and the product of it is Yellow-yellow. Emem's mother is also polluted. At the centre of the pollution picture is Zilayefa. She tries as much as possible to avoid what happened to her mother, but she inevitably falls into this vicious circle of polluted women. She is not polluted by a foreigner, but by a native Ijaw man: Admiral.

It is this violation and pollution and the eventual devastation of the woman that form the thematic nucleus of this novel. The woman symbolizes nature and as man continues to devastate the environment so also is the woman devastated. Though Agary in an interview with *New Nigerian* (2008) explains that the title of the novel "Captures the Colour of Oil" it will be germane to explain further that yellow does not approximately capture the image of oil; rather it captures vividly the ecological devastation caused by oil exploitation, also malnourished children have yellow hair. Yellow symbolizes plants that lack basic nutrients such as chlorophyll without which photosynthesis cannot take place. These basic nutrients symbolize the basic things that should make the region develop.

Zilayefa's triumph over her situation makes her wonder thus:

I had wanted to understand what it was besides money that made beautiful twenty-year old girl look at their short, fat, ugly fifty-eight year old white husbands with so much affection... there were more and more of my kind "African profits", "born-troways" ashawo pickin", father-unknowns... (171).

She resolves to end the birth of this set of people by aborting, especially because she is not sure of the father of her child when born. The painful abortion coincides with the death of Abacha, and a chance for a renaissance in Nigeria. "However, if I lived, it was an opportunity for a personal rebirth along with Nigeria" (177). The need to triumph over the problems of Nigeria's nationhood, also become a theme of this novel.

Commenting on this novel, Precious Onu (2009: 35) explains that: “Agary presents to us the current predicament of women in the Niger Delta, how they are treated by human and environmental factors” (35). She further holds that the well-being of women in this region is tied to the environment and when it is polluted they bear its brunt: “women bear the brunt of natural hazards, biodiversity loss and the depletion of the forest, pollution (air, water and soil) and the negative impact of industrial activities” (Onu 35).

Wumi Raji (1998: 111) also explains that “the combined effects of oil spills, chemical spills and gas flaring have devastated the lands and polluted the rivers...” as a result of which, “several schools of fish have had to flee” (Raji: 111). This in many ways has affected the “traditional occupation of the people...” (Raji: 111). Raji sees the inability of those who have destroyed the environment to renew it as part of the politics of hegemony where “injustice persists” (Raji: 112).

The novel also captures the political ecology of Nigeria. The focus here is on the maximum military dictatorship of Late General Sani Abacha. During which “there was palpable fear... and poverty... all those who dared complain about the land’s leader mysteriously disappeared” (99). There is a clamping down on opposition, “people who spoke out against the government were jailed” (99). Most of the victims are the ethnic minorities in Niger Delta who dared asked for the compensation for the oil exploration in the region. Among these victims is the environmental activist and creative writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was hanged with other Ogonis. Commenting on this, Ushie (2009:9) further asserts that:

Thus, instead of fetching Niger-Deltan’s gold bracelets, crude oil fetches them hands cuffs, instead of fetching them gold necklaces, its fetches them nooses, instead of fetching them tarred roads it fetches them early graves (9).

Ushie’s position points unmistakably to the political ecology of Nigeria at the time, an ecology that has not significantly changed. The story throws the search light on all aspects of the Nigerian political system. For instance, the judiciary which is supposed to be the last

hope of the common man appears to lack the courage to exercise justice:

Judges were so corrupt that a simple case would be adjourned over and over again until the litigants and their lawyers got the message and paid some bribes to the judge. Whoever acted quicker received a judgment in their favour. Such was the way of the justice system (106).

This miscarriage of justice makes Andrew Apter (1998:121) describes “the trial of Saro-Wiwa as a sham”. He further posits that the problem with the political ecology of Nigeria could be its federal structure, which is “fragile at best” (125), which has fanned ethnic animosity and which has continued to be the blight of Nigeria. Agary holds that the leaders ferment ethnic crisis to keep the people “under divide and rule” (109). She also lampoons Abacha’s self-succession ambition and the role of the political elite in the exercise: “he was the candidate for all five parties” (110). She then laments, “How could a country that exports crude oil have petrol shortages? How could a country that housed four refineries be exporting petrol when its residents were suffering without petrol?” (111). Agary sees police as corrupt and she blames it on poor remunerations “police officers salaries were miniscule and very irregular” (112) and this contributes to the many cases of “accidental discharges from the police rifles” (112). The political turmoil in the land ends with the death of the maximum dictator, Sani Abacha; but civil rule has not changed things either.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been examining Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* from the standpoint of eco-criticism. Our discussion has centred on the environment and its relationship with literature. The paper has also examined the role of literature in enhancing the well-being of people and the environment. The effect of oil exploitation on the Niger-Delta region has also been the business of this paper. Oil exploration has destroyed the Niger Delta region, leaving the people to live in squalor. Women who symbolize nature are violated and this has given rise to the “African Profit” “born troways” among others. The paper also examines the political ecology of Nigeria at the time. It finds it

difficult to share the view of the author that the death of the military dictator Gen. Sani Abacha should be seen as the birth of a new Nigeria for it has changed little of the travail of the citizenry.

The discovery of oil in Nigeria has placed Nigeria in a capitalist enclave where proceeds of oil are shared among political friends, and nothing has been done to alleviate the suffering of those whose land provides these resources. Agary uses the autobiographical style, which allows her to tell her story as an insider. Through the structure of the novel, she moves from the village to Port Harcourt and to Lagos and back to Port-Harcourt. Through this technique, she could compare life in the village and the city. Lolo, Madam George (Sisi), Admiral all contrast with the characters in the village like her mother, Bibi, among others.

In the final analysis, the choice of attaining personal rebirth and regeneration is in line with the author's artistic vision of the hope of redemption for the Niger-Delta devoid of arms.

It is the position of this paper that in order to bring ecological orientation to diverse people, there is the need to introduce ecological education in the school's curriculum. This will help bring ecological awareness to the larger society. Kaine Agary has done this through the creative enterprise.

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