

PETRO-CULTURE AND ECO-FEMINISM: THE WOMAN'S BODY AS A METAPHOR FOR ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION AND DOMINATION IN KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW*

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Abstract

*Centuries of man's belief and practice of anthropocentrism has impacted negatively on non-human part of nature, and this has led to catastrophic backlash in the forms of climate change, acid rain, flooding, earthquakes, desertification, pollution, ozone layer depletion, and a host of other ecological disasters. Today, experts from different branches of knowledge, including the arts, are raising man's consciousness that only symbiotic relationship between man and other components of nature can avert an impending doom. In furtherance of this call for the preservation of nature, Kaine Agary follows the footsteps of her literary predecessors, the Romantic writers, and also the tradition prevalent in her age, to draw an unwavering reader's attention to the environmental and human devastation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria as a result of oil-prospecting, oil-exploration and oil-exploitation. This research, therefore, is an eco-feminist reading of Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, which explores the causes and consequences of oil activities in the region as well as makes the connection between the degradation and domination of woman and nature as the woman's body is used as a metaphor for the degradation and domination of nature. The study invariably examines the foregrounding of the imagery of a devastated riverside ecology that depicts the predatory relationship between the male and female characters in the fictive world of the novel.*

Key words: Petro-culture and eco-feminism, Ecological degradation and domination, Kaine Agary, *Yellow-Yellow*

Introduction

It was William Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet, who did for Romantic poetry what the Austrian Jew, Sigmund Freud, did for psychology. Wordsworth had stated more than two hundred and fifty years ago that "Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her" (149). This statement has been validated because of man's degradation and domination of nature that nature now spits out its wrath on man in the form of flooding, climate change, desertification, acid rain and a host of other hostile activities of nature, which have left trails of death and anguish on man. The Romantic writers' served notice through their poems that if life should be sustained on earth, man should develop a symbiotic relationship with nature. Today, man can no longer ignore that call from observable negative impact of the hostile activities of man on the planet. And scientists and other scholars, including the creative writers, are not left out in the quest to find a lasting solution to the unleashing of nature's anger. It is in this bid that eco-criticism or eco-poetry has taken a centre stage in literary studies. Writers who had hitherto titled their writings to anthropocentrism, because they erroneously believed that the "most important life forms, and other forms of life are important to the extent they affect human or can be useful to human" (Kortenkamp and Moore 262) have been proven wrong. It is now a reality that the belief that humans can "exploit natural resources and animal species for their own purposes" (Abrams 172) is no longer tenable because of the devastation of the environment and the extinction of some of the animal species. Therefore, efforts are being made for the conservation of the environment and the preservation of animal species. To achieve this end, literature is also going green as environmental matters top the thematic preoccupations of literary writers and critics.

Though eco-criticism is still a very nascent field of study that “attempts to find a common ground between the human and the non-human to show how they can co-exist in various ways, because environmental issues have become an integral part of our existence” (Oppermann 4). Also Glotfelty describes eco-criticism as “literary studies in an age of environmental crisis” (1996:xv), and Lawrence Buell calls it “the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view” (239). To show that it is a synergic effort of scholars in different fields of knowledge that attempt to draw the consciousness of humans to the non-humans that co-exist with them in the ecology, Simon C. Estok broadens the frontiers of eco-poetics to include “any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function (theoretical, or otherwise) of the natural environment or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or others) that contribute to material practices in material worlds” (quoted in Dobie 239).

Literature, therefore, is the literary document with which eco-poets mirror man’s activities that devastate a particular part of the earth. And for literature from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where oil prospecting, oil exploration and oil exploitation has devastated every aspect of the Niger Delta ecosystem, the writers from that region like Kaine Agary, Tanure Ojaide and others believe that its every genre is a “weapon used to confront, antagonize, question and demand for a change in society” (Yerimah 184), and which Chinyere Nwahunanya sees as a “missile against the establishment” (xvii). Literature from the Niger Delta region has been that which encompasses both lamentation and a call for revolution. It is a literature of lamentation, because “Down the Delta, in the fountain of/oil; and gas, the natives wake up bereft of their traditional means of livelihood” (Ibiwari Ikiriko “Fairline” in *Oily Tears of the Delta* 7). Not only that the poet presents a region whose mangrove forests and aquatic life is atrophied, but its natural and human resources are devastated. This is a situation which forces the late environmental activist from that region to state that the oil cartel with the “Nigerian elite have turned the Delta and its environments into an ecological disaster and dehumanized its inhabitants” (Saro-Wiwa, 64). Ray Ekpu buttresses the situation of the blighted region and the plight of its people in proverbs as “the case of a man who lives on the bank of a river and washes his hands with spittle. It is the case of people who live in the farm and die of hunger” (quoted in Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 52). To further enlighten the world on the fatal fate of the Niger Delta region that produces the wealth of the nation, Ibaba S. Ibaba puts a percentage on the poverty level of the region. He claims that the “poverty level is about 80 percent and unemployment level 70 percent. Access to basic social amenities is very limited” (13).

With this type of unbecoming and inhuman situation in the Niger Delta region, there is the need for a revolution through struggle. And one of the older poets from the Niger Delta redefines the heroes that will lead this struggle for survival as the whole region faces a catastrophe. To him:

The new heroes are thus not only physical but multi-faceted in nature. The new heroes are not only physical warriors, but also activists in an array of struggles to realize a fair and just world for all human beings. The struggles for a clean environment, multinational sensitivity to local people in their business dealings, minority rights, women’s rights, rights of people to be treated as human, and compassion among others, constitute the criteria for the new heroism (Ojaide “Foreword” in *Waiting for the Hatching of the Cockerel* vii-viii).

Ojaide’s statement may be seen as the creed for a new heroism, particularly in the Niger Delta. Therefore, all the literary genres – poetry, drama, prose – interrogate the environmental and social dislocations as a result of oil exploration. As Nwahunanya puts the environmental and human

disasters in the region, “As the land is exploited, so also are the people. As the land bleeds oil, so the people bleed tears in their abject poverty, and real blood as they fall under the constant assault of government agents sent to silence their protests” (xvi). As the Niger Delta region and its people are devastated, dominated and dehumanized, Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* is one of the literary texts that mirror these. She writes the novel as one of the eco-feminists, who according to Ann B. Dobie are “combining postmodern approaches with ecological issues, for example, are interested in the way representations of nature are influenced by gender. They also see the similarities in the oppression of women and the efforts to dominate nature” (247). Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*, therefore, does not only narrate the events of the environmental crises in the Niger Delta, it 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. In the critical evaluation of this work, secondary methodology of data collection and analysis – the library and the internet – will be used after the review of scholarship on the literary text.

In Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu’s “Crisis and the Literature of the Niger Delta: The Dual Aesthetics of Lachrymal and the Revolution”, they evaluated several works from the region, including Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*. They suggest that there is the dual aesthetics of lamentation and revolution that characterize the literary texts of writers from the Niger Delta. They particularly believe that despite Agary’s concerted effort to restrict her exploration to the personal:

...she also makes profound statements about the people of the Niger Delta as a cornered public that has exhausted its crying, sulking and complaining about its fate. She also presents them as a people that can mobilize themselves to undertake violent protests and other revolution-inclined activities (69).

Besides, in Beatrice Orife’s critical appraisal of some selected novels of female writers from the Niger Delta, she argues that the central concern of these feminists is the validation of the women’s claim that the women are victims and the oppressed of the patriarchal system. She claims that these women writers are redeeming the diminutive image of women by telling their own stories by themselves. She concludes that *Yellow-Yellow*, *Destination Biafra* and *Condolences* raised vital issues about the survival of man in a degraded environment; however, Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*:

...depicts the people of the oil rich Niger-Delta region groan under the evil hands of the multinational that exploit the land, to the detriment of the people. She mirrors the disastrous effects, both human and environmental of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. The novel opens with the tragedy that has become the Nigeria nightmare (170).

Also Ed Simon’s “The Niger Delta and the Women’s Predicament: A Study of Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*”, the critic sees the novel as depicting the sociological conditions of the woman and the Niger Delta environment. He draws the attention of the reader to the social ills prevalent in the region as well as the female predicament and the dichotomy between the rural and urban areas. Also in J.E Akung and A. Iloeje’s “Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*: A Study in Eco-criticism”, they examined the place of women within the political ecology of Nigeria. They suggest that women in the novel have been sexually polluted. The body of the woman symbolizes nature which man has polluted (2014).

Having looked at some of the literature on Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*, it is obvious that serious works had been done to ground the text in eco-criticism, which Simon C. Estok in “A Report Card on

Eco-criticism' says is "also very young" (1), and which William Slaymaker believes is the exclusive domain of the white race, because "whites have more time for nature than blacks since blacks must use a great deal of energy resisting or coping with white hegemony" (684). Not only that Slaymaker's statement is biased and narrow in view, it is also eurocentric. Bernth Lindfors's observation that West African writers have shifted their focus from excessive obsession with the effects of colonialism on the continent to a "preoccupation with more universal themes rooted in more specific contemporary realities" (26) is relevant. It is glaringly obvious that not only that Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* deals with a universal theme of degradation of the environment; it goes further like Lindfors stated, to examine the specific contemporary realities of the devastation of the Niger Delta environment and its people. Therefore, this essay intends to widen further the scope of scholarship in this text not only in looking at the work as an environmental discourse, but to further view it as eco-feminist discourse where the writer opens a connection between the domination and devastation of the Niger Delta environment with the devastation and domination of the woman. In fact, the woman's body is seen as a metaphor for the violated and raped Niger Delta region.

Textual Analysis of *Yellow-Yellow*

Apart from the Nigerian Civil War, no event has attracted the attention of the literary writers and critics like the environmental and human devastation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In fact, every literary genre from that region – whether poetry, fiction or drama – is preoccupied with the ruin the ecology of the Niger Delta has been subjected to as a result of oil exploration by different oil cartels in the region. Kaire Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* follows that tradition, but goes a step further to metaphorize the degradation of the woman's body with that of the domination of nature by man. The one hundred and seventy-eight-paged novel in thirteen chapters is narrated in the first person point of view, which has the advantage of a first-hand experience as the seventeen-year-old Zilayefa tells the story of her life, those of the other characters that inhabit the world of the novel and the realities in the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta. The novel is set in an unnamed village in the Niger Delta and in Port Harcourt and Lagos. The namelessness of Zilayefa's village, where the oil spill destroys the farmland and aquatic lives, is done on purpose – to show the prevalence of the situation in all the villages where oil companies prospect and drill oil. In the first chapter of the novel, Zilayefa tells the reader of the oil spillage which "turned out some of them [the villagers] had also lost their farmland that day" (4). It is not only the farmland that is lost by the villagers, including Zilayefa's mother, but "the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path" (4). The crude oil's effect is not restricted to the animals and land, but its smell also impacted on human beings because, Zilayefa who is curious to see the crude for the first time in her life realizes that the smell "was strong – so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach. I bent over, and retched so hard I became dizzy. I felt that everything had turned to black and was spinning around me" (4). It is this oil spillage that Zilayefa's mother and the other villagers lose their farmland, and in a "single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance" (4) and with that her dream of sending her daughter, whom she is saddled with the responsibility of her upbringing as a single parent, dimmed. Though the woman tries in vain to send her only child to school, she becomes a recluse and toils throughout the day to sustain that fantasy, but Zilayefa tells the reader that the dream collapses like a pack of cards, because "by the time I finished school, my mother did not have enough money for university. I could not even take the qualifying examinations because she did not have the registration fee" (10-11).

But the loss of Zilayefa's mother's means of livelihood is a gradual process; it is not the day she starts her narration that it happens, for it is a gradual process. There are other natural resources that are lost through the degradation of the ecology of the unnamed village, which serves as a representative of other villages, because year after year, the villagers lose "the creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares" (4).

Despite the fact that the area contributes to the wealth of the nation, the oil companies refuse to pay compensation to the villagers, because according to them, "they said they suspected sabotage by the youths" (4). Again, the villagers are reduced to an untold hardship and penury, despite the fact that their land and water produce the wealth of the nation. There is no electricity in the villages; there is also no functional library in the schools; the teachers are owed their salaries, even when there is scholarship, those that live in the village do not have any information on that and how to access it. Because of the lack of these basic amenities and the conflicts and violence that engulf the village, Zilayefa wants to escape to the city in order to save herself from "certain death in my claustrophobic village" (17). The novelist, therefore, presents an environment that is so polluted and lacks the most basic thing in life, drinking water, as the villagers are forced to drink polluted water from the river because:

How many more times could I bear the pain like a hundred razor blades slashing my private part because the 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 pipeline that moved the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the selected few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank (39).

Kaine Agary presents a degraded and despoiled environment that makes it impossible for the natives to live a meaningful life, and because of that, the youth are very restive. There are violent clashes prevalent in the region as they kidnap oil workers to forestall oil exploration, but at times, "one or two of our boys failed to return from a mission" (10) because "the police had caught and killed them" (10). Apart from using the police to kill the youths of the oil producing areas, who are agitating for environmental justice, the oil companies are using the Nigerian armed forces as their private security to terrorize and sometimes kill innocent villagers who questioned the inequity of their situation – "living in squalor while barrels of oil pumped out of their land provided the luxury that surrounded the oil workers and the elite of Nigeria" (158). The worst of the killings the novelist presents is that of Kenule Saro-Wiwa, and eight others, who are environmental activists, who protest the violations of the environment and the peoples of Niger Delta, by the military junta that runs the country. His kangaroo trial and execution cause an uproar in the world that Anthony Kwame Appiah condemns the irresponsibility of oil companies and various post-colonial governments in Nigeria that "have surely been treading in the footsteps of their colonial predecessors" (xx). Chinyere Nwahunanya also indicts the "deliberate government neglect and marginalization of the minorities" (2011: xvii) for the human and environmental degradation of the region. It is also believed that the oil it produces is at the centre of the three year-old civil war between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the secessionist Biafra (Saro-Wiwa 64). And that is the reason Tayo Olafioye does not mince words when he labels ruthless rulers, like late General Sani Abacha, who ordered the murdering of Ken Saro-Wiwa as "maggots swimming critically in their own stench" (179). However, the murder of Saro-Wiwa through a judicial travesty does not end environmental activism in the

Niger Delta, rather his spirit in death inspires and drives it. In fact, he becomes the symbol of the revolution in the Niger Delta.

Agary portrays the social, political and economic reality in Nigeria, which is a country where anything goes, as there is no accountability on the part of the leaders and the led. The reader is made to feel the chaos in the country that is riddled with bribery and corruption, a country where there is no electricity though they have rivers and ocean waters that can be harnessed to provide electricity, a country that harvests huge sums of revenues from oil exploration; yet, the educational system is dysfunctional; a country that produces crude oil in abundance; yet, it “could boast of no working refineries, leaving us with incessant fuel scarcity” (*Yellow-Yellow* 175). It is a country where people bribe to get driver’s licences without going through the hurdle of driving tests. It is a country where the rich and the powerful pocket the proceeds of the oil sale and “those who dared complain about the land’s leader mysteriously disappear” (99). With such a setting, it is obvious that violence and militancy would be bred, and to borrow the language of vegetative imagery everything in such setting – village, town, country, man, animals and plants – would be etiolated and anemic as symbolized in the title, *Yellow-Yellow*. And anybody that wants to make any meaningful progress, particularly the youths, who bear the brunt and agony of the conflicts and violence initiated by the adults (Nwoke 2013), must leave such a highly charged environment in order to survive. And that is the reason the female protagonist of the novel, *Yellow-Yellow*, from whom the novel derives its title, feels like escaping from her bondage. As she puts it, “I knew every square inch of my village, and I felt like a trapped animal” (31).

As has been mentioned before, this study is an ecofeminist reading of Kaine Agary’s novel, where she not only deals with the issue of the degradation of the Niger Delta environment and the domination of its people, but she sees the woman’s body and domination by men as metaphor for that of nature. Though Agary’s novel starts with the presentation of oil spillage in an unnamed Ijaw village, as the story progresses, it becomes obvious that the Niger Delta women, as symbolized by the protagonist, are dominated and degraded by the men-folk. This view may not be agreeable to some male writers and critics. As Charles E. Nnolim sees the relationship of the two genders, “Woman hates... confronts man, her vaunted oppressor, but needs love... for emotional fulfillment [that] can only be provided by the ‘enemy’ man” (quoted in Nwachukwu-Agada 5). But to Hilary Chala Kowimo:

When women bear the burden of systemic oppression solely because they are women, they are tempted to perceive themselves as victims of patriarchy who at once belong and do not quite belong to nearly every space.... In the spirit of revolution, women are simultaneously victims of oppression and agents of changes (25).

It is within this belief that women in the world of the novel are presented as the ‘other’ of the men. They are seen as the excluded and at the margin of public and private spaces that Agary links the ordeal of the women with the ordeal of the environment in the literary text. She achieves this through the presentation of a seventeen-year-old girl, *Yellow-Yellow*, whose name is the same with the title of the text. The protagonist who starts the story of the novel at seventeen years and the experiences she garners spans only one year, but within this one year, a careful reader sees that that the woman’s body serves as a metaphor for the environment. Because the way the woman is exploited sexually is the way the Niger Delta natural resources and its nature are exploited without any care of the negative consequences.

Yellow-Yellow is a product of the brief love-affair between a Greek sailor and an Ijaw woman, which ends briefly the way it begins as “She went to the port to look for him one day, as has become her habit, and was told that the ship had left. There was no message, he was gone, leaving behind his planted seed in my mother’s *belle*” (7). Her mother at eighteen years, without a mother and a father, is heart-broken, and is left saddled with the problem of single-parenthood in a devastated and impoverished village. She makes herself an outcast, but determines to train her only child to the university level, but that dream is blighted by the pathetic plight of the villagers who lost their means of livelihood without compensation. To show that this state of affairs is prevalent in the Niger Delta, Yellow-Yellow’s mother’s name is only ‘Ina Binaebi’, a name that does not give her a sufficient identity as her family background is not given. Most of the girls in the village migrate from the poverty-stricken village to Port Harcourt and Bonny, which they see as the El Dorado. And the girls see the white men, who either work in the oil industries or are sailors, or those who lumber wood or engage in other forms of businesses as their tickets to better lives. And nothing is too much for them to do to achieve their objective, because, according to the narrator:

Girls did anything to get a white. If it meant traveling 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 girls face for daring to swoon in on the whitey they discovered and laid claims to first, then they were prepared for the battle. Whatever it took, they did (37).

And part of the impossibilities the girls have to undergo is dating men old enough to be their fathers as the protagonist does. Because she feels trapped in the village and wants to escape from her cage, she dates Sergio, a Spanish business man, whom she surmizes his age to be “between forty-five and fifty” against her own age of seventeen years. Apart from keeping the white men as lovers, the girls are also ready and willing to marry them, even when they are as old as their fathers; yet, within this marriage, there is racial discrimination and prejudice as the otherness of the black women to the white men is seen in the women only being married “under native law and customs” (100). This type of marriage does any binding force for the white men, who use them only as sex-objects without any emotional attachment or procreate with them because they have been away from their families and wives for months.

But it is not only the white men who are indicted in the use of the women as sex-objects. The black men equally do not fair better as in the exploitation of the natural resources of the Niger Delta. Both Admiral, an Ijaw man and the Spanish business man, Sergio, who is bored with his antique-furniture business in Europe and comes to Nigeria to explore a business option with Tarilabo, Chief Smoke’s younger brother, are both indicted. The fact that traditional leaders are also involved in the exploitation of the natural resources is evident. “They were interested in logging timber from the forests in our village and wanted to discuss that possibility with Amananaowei [the traditional ruler of their village]” (22). The same complicity of the locals in the exploitation of the natural resources in the ecology of the Niger Delta is seen in the use of the Niger Delta women as sex-objects and the beasts of burden by the men. For instance, women are regarded by the Ijaw patriarchy as the breadwinners, because in the past, “every husband was expected to give his new wife a dogout canoe to fish, earn a living, and help to feed the family” (39). The use of women as the family beasts of burden is not only a legend, a situation that existed in the past, it continues to the present as:

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 work extra kilometers to get firewood or cultivate and harvest the food now fertilized by their sweat and blood. Cobwebs would fill the pots during the time that passed before the men contributed to the feeding expenses of the household (40).

Despite the fact that the women are the breadwinners in their families and they toil all day to provide for the needs of the family, they are seen as inferior to the men, and excluded from private and public spaces as the men claim that, “according to tradition, it was their exclusive right to make all the decisions inside and outside the home” (40). The black men in the novel are presented as being irresponsible, because Yellow-Yellow’s classmate, Ebiere, who is pregnant, has a helpless situation since “Her mother had young children who she was bringing up single-handedly. Her father earned money which he spent every which way, except to take care of his family” (42). It is not only the older married men who live off the women; the young men also live off the proceeds of the girls’ prostitution. The narrator draws attention to the dilemma of the girls who:

In addition to worrying about the other girls and crazy whiteys, they had to worry about 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 booze and hard drugs, they would destroy all the property that had gotten in the way of their mission. In areas where the local boys acted as pimps for the girls, there were cases where one brother killed another over the returns from a girl they were pimping (*Yellow-Yellow* 38).

Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* also explores the emotional and psychological conflict in Zilayefa, a mulatto girl who grows up without a father. This brings to the reader’s attention the extra burden of children of inter-racial unions in the Niger Delta. Zilayefa does not have any paternal identity and as such does not know who her father is and she is desirous, like any other normal child, of knowing who her father is. Her not being given any identity underscores the ubiquitous nature of such occurrence. Not only that Agary projects the degradation of women in the world of the novel, she also projects the degradation of the mulatto children, who are looked down upon. She shows that the contact between the Westerners and the Niger Delta has produced for centuries not only the exploitation and the degradation of the environment, but also the exploitation and degradation of the Niger Delta women and children. According to the narrator, the ubiquitous nature of the occurrence of Yellows, who derive their names from the uniqueness of their skin pigmentation, is seen in this narration:

I found out that there were generations of yellows in the Niger Delta areas, and each 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... The next generations were those from the Syrian, Lebanese and Greek businessmen and sailors... (74-75).

Some of these mulattoes know their fathers and some are lucky that their fathers marry their mothers and send them to school. However, the worst of the group that suffer so much indignities are those regarded as the “*born-troways*, rejected by our fathers or, worse, nonexistent to them” (74). Yellow-Yellow or Zilayefa belongs to this group, and she bears the agony of growing up not knowing her father, and her mother not saying anything about him. Whether the mulattoes know their fathers or not, in the past they are killed because they are seen as bringing shame to the girls’ families. Though the time has changed; yet, they are not fully integrated and accepted in society as people have a preconceived notion of them as being “concerted, promiscuous, undisciplined, and confused” (74). The mulattoes are branded derogatorily as “*born-troways*,” “*ashawo-pikins*,” and “*father-unknowns*” (171) because they are the “products of women of easy virtue who did not have morals to pass on to their children” (74). Their fathers not showing interest in them and not providing for them rub off on them because they are “running around the slums of Port Harcourt” (171). In Zilayefa’s case, she grows up in the village and she is the only one with such a complexion there until she sees Sergio, to whom she says: “the similarities in our physical attributes reminded me how different I was from every one else in the village” (19). Also the villages have to contend with teenage pregnancies like Ebire’s.

Agary highlights the burden of these children, who are born out of wedlock and whose skin pigmentation stigmatizes. Zilayefa is infatuated with Sergio whom she sees as a means of escaping from the cage of her village life. She is also drawn to Admiral, not necessarily because of the money she will get from him, “but because I was hoping that the relationship would give me a taste of close paternal affection that I had never had” (138). Admiral exploits her naivety; she gives in to his love advances and loses her “innocence that day” (145). She hopes “that in return I would experience the emotional comfort, attention, and protection that I had seen between him and Alaere” (145). But this is not to be because, when she gets pregnant, it becomes obvious that the man is a pedophile, who loves his two children, but “the others he was interested in were the ones who kept his bed warm” (174). He simply gives her money with an instruction to go to Dr. George and have the pregnancy aborted. Zilayefa feels betrayed by the man she trusts so much for her emotional stability and rejects his offer. She is determined to abort the pregnancy, which may be Admiral’s or Sergio’s own, but it should not be by Dr. George, who must have aborted so many pregnancies for young girls Admiral puts in the family way. She decides that the pregnancy cannot stand as an encumbrance to her education and a better future for her; therefore, she picks up, chews and swallows leaves, and barks of plants that make it possible for her body to push “out blood and clumps of tissue that had been forming a little person inside me for almost three months” (178). She is not ready to be saddled with an unwanted pregnancy like her mother and others; she is not ready to give birth to a child that is already blighted by her colour and the absence of a father. She, therefore, decides to take control of her reproductive health in order to continue with her education. And in her determination to focus on her education like her mother, Sisi and Lolo have earlier advised her, she does not need Emem who lacks any seriousness and who may lead her again into ruining her life. Agary, therefore, uses the devastation and domination of her body by Admiral and Sergio, as a metaphor for the devastation and domination of the Niger Delta environment by white foreigners, who are prospecting for oil and other natural resources in the region with the connivance of the Nigerian elite. She leaves an undertone of a revolution that would bring a change if the owners of the devastated and dominated land and bodies are determined to take control of their destiny and future into their own hands.

Foregrounding of Imagery of Devastation and Domination in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

The literariness of a literary text is heavily dependant on literary language, and without it, the text would be like any other field of knowledge that depends on language for communication. And for a reader to unmask the theme or themes and the vision of life of the creative artist in his text, he must, first of all, unmask the literary language that envelops or encapsulates those theme or themes and the vision of life. One cannot go without the other as far as literature is concerned, as literary language is to literature what the carapace is to the turtle. And that is the reason Charles E. Nnolim describes the synergy between literary language and literature as:

...writing which is more emotionally moving then intellectually instructive; that writing which primarily deals with a make-believe world; that writing whose language is highly connotative rather than denotative, symbolic rather than literal, figurative rather than plain; that writing in which the ideas are wrapped up in symbols, images, concepts; that writing which normally catapults us into another world of appearance and reality through the powers of the imagination (2012:87-88).

Having seen how the literary critic, Nnolim, describes literary language, we shall then see how Agary appropriates it in *Yellow-Yellow* to foreground the imagery of the devastation, domination and oppression of both nature and women in the world of the novel.

For instance, in the description of the crude oil spillage that pollutes Zilayefa's villagers' farmland that destroys the dream of her mother for a higher education for her and their means of livelihood, the narrator is not content with saying that the oil is "knee-deep," but she evokes a powerful imagery that concretizes the picture of the volume of crude oil that devastates the land in "drowning" in the sentence, "I watched as the thick liquid spread out covering more land and drowning small animals in its path" (4). The quantity of crude is so much and comparable to the sea or oceanic waters that is given human attributes in the drowning of children as 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" (39). The imagery evoked in the personification of the waters as being "hungry" and "swallowing" children foregrounds the perilous life-style of the villagers as her "ears still rang from maternal wails" as the mothers' mourn the death of their children lost to sickness and to sea. As if this is not enough to foreground the poverty and lack of the essential basic amenities to the villagers that produce the wealth of the nation, the same water that is polluted as it "flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines" (39) as well as being polluted by human waste in the same water she and the other villagers drink. With the land and waters of the village being polluted by the activities of oil exploitation in the village and the lack of basic things of life, Zilayefa finds it intolerable and painful to continue living in the village as she further foregrounds the imagery of that pain in the simile, "How many more times could I bear the pain like a hundred razor blades slashing my private part..." (39). With the degradation of the rural environment by oil pollution which affects the land, the water and the air through "acid rain, gas flares", she finds it difficult to live in the village and wants "someone who would save me from certain death in my claustrophobic village" (17). The word, "claustrophobic", evokes the imagery of a cage and sickness, and the certain death in the village may be a result of the pollutions of the land, water and air of the village by oil exploration and the "conflicts, the violence, and the depression that characterize our village more and more" (24) as a result of the restiveness of the youths of the village who demand for compensation and environmental protection and justice, which are lacking in the

Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is on record that the British Petroleum oil spillage in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 cost the resignation of the Chief Executive Officer of the oil giant, Tony Hayward, and compensatory settlements that ran into billions of dollars. However, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where the novel is set, the oil companies “were not going to pay compensation for all the destruction that the burst pipes has caused” (4), and anybody who criticizes them is either incarcerated or killed by the agents of the government.

Having foregrounded the imagery of a devastated environment that makes it impossible for one to live in it, the protagonist, Zilayefa wants to escape from the village at all costs. And the first available option for her is to use a Spanish man, Sergio, to escape to Port Harcourt. She gets into a relationship with him, but the love is not there as the writer uses the imagery of a riverine ecology to foreground the love experience that must have made her mother to fall for a stranger in the simile, “I had expected that when love, or something close to it, hit me, it would be like rough current against a canoe...” (23). The forceful nature of a “rough current against a canoe” is lacking in her relationship with Sergio because she is infatuated with him and sees him as a means of escape from the suffocating environment, while he sees her as simply a sex-object to be sexually exploited and dumped, not minding the crisis it would cause her. He still has “his beautiful wife and their twenty-year-old twin boys” (172), whose pictures he always carries about in his wallet, and whom he talks about often.

Even in her relationship with the two older men, Admiral and Sergio, the narrator foregrounds the imagery of the predatory nature of the relationship in the simile, “I was not sure if Admiral was out of town, so agreeing to follow Sergio to his place that day was like a small fish dancing close to a fisherman’s net: with luck I could slip through and not get caught” (170). However, she is unlucky because when she gets pregnant, she is the one that suffers the consequences of the pregnancy. But it is obvious that the personal experience of her journey of love with older men, combined with the experiences of her mother, who “hardly spoke about him” (19) and “had no pictures of him” (19), and Lolo, who “was going through her own issues with Kamal” (160), who dumps her after several years of their presumed “perfect relationship” (160) and Sisi, with her beauty, power and position as a successful mullato in Port Harcourt, also goes through the degradation of being a single parent because the father of his daughter “claimed his daughter and treated her well, even though he buckled under his father’s pressure that he not marry me” (101).

By the time she comes to the end of the journey in the novel, the young narrator is no longer the naïve Zilayefa. It is no longer the naïve narrator who after the oil spillage in the village for “the first time saw what crude oil looked like” (4) and stays there until someone instructs her to leave the farm because of the hazardous nature of the crude oil. It is no longer the same Zilayefa who is infatuated with “Sergio, the man who I had taken to my special hideaway, the man who had kissed me so tenderly and made me feel butterflies in my stomach, the man whose voice mesmerized me, the one who was my ticket out of the village” (28). It is no longer Zilayefa who sees Admiral as being “so attentive and sweet” (139), who “felt tingles go up and down my spine when he put his head on my lap” (139), and who “dreamt of Admiral that night. My dreams were happy...” (140). It is Zilayefa who has seen and experienced that men use women as sex-objects without caring about the negative consequences on the woman as the oil companies devastate the environment of the Niger Delta where they exploit oil without caring about the flora and fauna in its ecology. As she becomes aware of the degradation and domination of nature and women in the world around her, her utopian language changes to ideational as it expresses the content of the “speakers experience of the real

world, including the inner world of his own consciousness” (Halliday 143). This is because “... the human mind and behaviour are reflected by or through language” (Adegbite 11). In order to reflect the reality of the world around her and her new radical or revolutionary spirit, the language of Zilayefa’s narration changes from being what Robin Lakoff calls “powerless forms” that reinforces women’s subordinate position, which collude in their own subordination (1975). Her new-found freedom and her new-found voice are reflected in her language, which not only closes the gender difference between the men and the women in the novel, but also a hint to an end in the degradation of the Niger Delta ecology and an end to the use of women as sex-objects. To her, with the demise of the military head of state that terrorizes the country and allows the devastation and domination of the Niger Delta by oil companies, the people are “celebrating the demise of a villain” (176). And her own degradation and domination by elderly men who use her as a sex-object, with the pregnancy she intends to abort, she is determined that “...if I lived, it was an opportunity for a personal rebirth along with Nigeria. I promised God and myself that I would focus only on completing my education and making my mother, Sisi and Lolo proud of me” (177). She does not want her future to be encumbered by an unwanted baby as well as a child whose stigmatization is already predetermined. She has been empowered by her stay in the city, her interaction with liberated women like Sisi, Lolo and Emen. Her body and her mind have left the restricting cage of her village and she can no longer accept the stratification of the social classes “with the rich and powerful at the top and the poor and the powerless at the bottom” (Hudson 240). To Zilayefa, she is determined that her body can no longer be a metaphor for sexual slavery for “Men who had strayed from their “happily” married lives... and men in high society who had no problems sleeping with their lower-class mothers...” (*Yellow-Yellow* 174). She is also determined to abort the growing foetus in her womb so that it cannot go through the crucible of fatherlessness she has passed through that implicates both black and white men because, “I could not deal with trying to explain to my child that its father was a nice white man who offered me no security or may be that its father was the man on network news every month discussing the Niger Delta” (174). The foetus has to go for her to cover her shame and start a new life with a clean slate, instead of being saddled with an unwanted child.

Conclusion

It is submitted that this research has sought to prove that human existence on the planet Earth is threatened by the negative reactions of the non-human forms of nature because of the violence the first has meted on the second. And creative writers and literary critics, like scholars and researchers in other fields of knowledge, have raised the awareness on the catastrophe that would follow if this one-sided relationship is not reversed. Kaine Agary in her award-winning novel, *Yellow-Yellow*, does not only raise the issue of the exploitation and degradation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria by foreign oil cartels and their Nigerian allies, but goes further to reveal that the women in the region are also dominated and exploited as sex-objects by their male counterparts — both foreign and indigenous. In fact, she draws a nexus in the domination and degradation of nature and the woman’s body in a metaphor. An eco-poetic reading of the literary text shows that the way men exploit, degrade and dominate nature is the way they exploit, degrade and dominate the women in the region. However, she imbues a revolutionary spirit in her characters that struggle for the repossession of their land and body. It becomes obvious that true freedom can come to the owners of the land and bodies if they can control the resources of their land and their reproductive health respectively.

It is further submitted that Agary achieves this through a literary language that foregrounds and evokes the imagery of a devastated riverine ecology and reproductive health, which underscores the predatory relationship between man and nature and the two genders in the fictive world of the novel.

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Petro-culture and eco-feminism: The woman's body as a metaphor for ecological degradation and domination in Kaine Agary's "Yellow-Yellow". Jan 2015. 93-106. Psychology is in the midst of a transformation into a more balanced and inclusive body of theory, research, and practice. Contemporary feminism has provided psychology with a wealth of new theoretical frameworks and scholarship. In turn, psychological research is being used to further social change to benefit girls and women. This is an exciting time for students to begin their study of women and gender, and an exciting time to be teaching in this dynamic field.