



Research Article



Check for updates

Section: Literature and Criticism



This article is published by Royallite Global, Kenya in the *Studies in Aesthetics and Arts Criticism*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 2021

Article Information

Submitted: 4th January 2021

Accepted: 25th May 2021

Published: 9th June 2021

Additional information is available at the end of the article

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

To read the paper online, please scan this QR code



The damaged woman in the damaged environment: An ecofeminist critique of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006)

Ololade Adeyemo & Abimbola Shittu

Department of English, Bingham university, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the connection between the violation of the woman and the degradation of the environment in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*. The researcher has done this by illustrating how the female bears the direct brunt of the destruction of her econiche and by explicating how the ideology of patriarchy is responsible for the destruction of the environment and the emasculation of the female characters in *Yellow Yellow*. The emphasis here is to recognize the interconnectedness of all life, and to counter all unhealthy relationships geared towards the oppression of women and the environment. Drawing insights from Vandana Shiva's critique of patriarchal capitalism, we may argue firmly that ecology is a feminist issue. The paper concludes that there is an urgent need for humans to move beyond power-based relationships if we must achieve an egalitarian society and a healthy environment. Additionally, we must emphasize the interdependence of all life.

Keywords: degradation, ecofeminism, environment patriarchy, women

How to Cite:

Adeyemo, O., & Shittu, A. (2021). The damaged woman in the damaged environment: an ecofeminist critique of kaine agary's yellow. *Studies in Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 1(1). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/saac/article/view/635>

Public Interest Statement

This paper is a moderate contribution to the discourse in ecofeminism. It intends to explore how the degradation of the Niger Delta environment in Southern Nigeria, directly translates to the deterioration of the female folk who depend on their environment for survival. The paper attempts to incorporate a Nigerian ecofeminism insight into the burgeoning discourse on ecofeminism.



© 2021 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY-NC-SA) license.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region located in southern Nigeria is ironically not a land flowing with milk and honey by virtue of its large crude oil deposits. Rather, it is a region constantly bedeviled by violent uprisings as a result of the battle for resource control by multinational oil companies and disenfranchised citizens. Selina Nwulu observes that although the discovery of oil was meant to enrich the inhabitants of the Delta, ‘the move to oil production wasn’t based on the needs of the indigenous communities of the Niger Delta; but rather part of the expansion of the British imperialist powers’ (selinanwulu.wordpress.com).

Even though a lot of money has been generated from Nigerian oil exports, majority of the local communities in the Niger Delta still wallow in abject poverty. Sadly, women bear the greatest brunt of the environmental disharmony in the Delta. This is because they are often saddled with the task of fending for their families. Most women in the Delta are the care givers of their families and coupled with poverty, they are even compelled to play active financial roles in their families. This has exposed them to various forms of brutality and discrimination by patriarchal violence, in a bid to survive.

The heroine in Kaine Agary’s novel, *Zilayefa*, recounts that fishing and farming were the occupations that sustained her mother, grandmother and great grandmother (p.40). The Niger Delta is thus an agrarian community and women produce wealth in partnership with nature. However, they have been victims of various forms of violence and have suffered confiscation of their land in the oil wars that have plagued the oil producing environment for several years.

Ecofeminists assert that the environment is a feminist issue. This is because rural and indigenous women in subsistent economies depend on nature for survival. This is evident in the text when Yellow’s mother Bibi loses her land after an oil spill and can no longer afford to cater for her daughter’s needs. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that environmental abuse in the Niger Delta fuels violence against women and the environment. Awhefeada, in *Ecocritical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* comments on Agary’s *Yellow Yellow* as follows:

The opening montage is betokening of the novel’s preoccupation: the environment and women. inherent in this inauspicious beginning is the hazard that the burst crude oil pipe poses to the environment, which also meant the loss of farmland, which also meant the loss of the means of livelihood for the villagers, especially for women like Zilayefa’s mother. The gravitas of this ruinous occurrence can be located in the mother’s dumbfounded shock, which robbed her of her words. The new condition of dispossession and imminent impoverishment arising from the loss of farmland to the oil spill robs her of the agency of speech, as the narrator puts it, “void of words” (Agary,3). Thus, the silencing, marginalizing, and suffering of women is derived from the degradation of the environment (99).

From the foregoing, it is evident that environmental concerns are clearly the concerns of women because so many women’s lives, especially in third world are intimately connected to the environment.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by Vandana Shiva’s principle of ecology and feminism. As an ecofeminist, she acknowledges the connection between the two movements and avers that the worldview

that causes environmental degradation and injustice is the same worldview that causes a culture of male domination, exploitation and inequality for women. Shiva's ecofeminist strand is called critical ecofeminism. Her theory focuses on third world women whose lives have been affected by the forces of corporate globalization and colonialism. Shiva and Mies explain that:

The devastation of the earth and her beings by corporate warriors are feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way (14).

Shiva posits that women cannot be liberated without a simultaneous struggle for the preservation of the environment and of all life on earth, from the dominant patriarchal/capitalist worldview (Mies and Shiva, 16). Mies and Shiva's Ecofeminism outrightly kick against capitalism which can be regarded as a patriarchal structure, and propose a shift in world view as a requisite for saving nature and ending the dual oppression of woman and nature. Shiva's vision for a combined movement to end the oppression of both women and nature is part of the solution to achieving sustainability on the earth. In conclusion, Shiva states that humanity must acknowledge that they are part of the larger web of life that provides for their sustenance. Therefore, it is imperative that they protect the fragile web of life, not as dominators - men over women/humans over nature, but as partners with every other form of life on earth.

The Female Body as Commodity in Kaine Agary's *Yellow*

Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* chronicles the journey of a young Caucasian girl growing up in the deteriorating Niger delta environment. She experiences intense hardship, especially after her mother's farmland becomes contaminated by an oil spill which eventually shatters her dreams for Ziyalefa's future. Like most of the young girls in her village, Ziyalefa is soon enticed into moving from the village to the city for a better life. Ironically life in the city is hellish. The young girls are degraded and contaminated in the quest for survival in the city. They are vulnerable and considered as sex objects by the ravenous men who plunder them for pleasure. Even though Ziyalefa is lucky to fall into the hands of nurturing guardians in the city who try their best to ensure that she is comfortable and educated, her innate desire to have a father figure exposes her to an old and wealthy retired admiral in the Nigerian Navy. The admiral lures Ziyalefa into a world of sex and abortion of pregnancies. He treats her like commodity which can be used and discarded at will and takes advantage of her naivety.

The novel also highlights the unscrupulous activities of the ruling elite who defraud the masses and engender unethical oil drilling activities by the multinational oil companies. The story wraps up on a despondent note as there is no sign of an end to the problems in the Niger Delta. One of the effects of industrialization on the environment is that it has robbed the female of her economic status and led to her moral and social decline. Nefarious development activities have engendered patriarchy which has in turn emasculated the woman and the environment. Environmental issues are issues that boarder largely on survival. This is because women in developing countries depend on the environment for sustenance. In the Niger delta for instance, which serves as the background of Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, women are actively engaged in agricultural activities. The protagonist of the novel Zilayefa, chronicles that when her mother was younger, before the onset of oil exploration activities in the Delta, "every husband was expected

to give his new wife a dugout canoe... to fish, earn a living, and help to feed the family (39). This explains that women in Yellow's society are active financial contributors to their households and they depend solely on the environment for survival.

Also, the nexus between the woman and her environment is evident in the novel, because the environmental decadence rapidly leads to the degradation of the female folk who become exposed to various forms of violence and discrimination in a bid to survive. This lends credence to Shiva and Mies' notion of prostitution tourism where the "desire for sex is projected on to an exotic woman, a non-white woman, a woman of the colonized who due to her poverty has to serve the white man" (*Ecofeminism*,135). This is glaring in the novel when the female characters become commodities in the hands of the foreigners in the quest for a "better life". Bibi for instance, migrates from her small village to Port Harcourt, "with visions of prosperity" (7) but instead falls prey to a sex starved sailor who had been at sea for several months and desperately wanted to satisfy his orgies. He gives Bibi material things including depositing a baby in her womb (*Sexualized Body, Exploited Environment*), then he fizzles away into thin air leaving Bibi to cater for her unborn child singlehandedly.

Similarly, the multinational oil workers in collaboration with the local ruling elite perpetuate the subjugation of the female characters in the text. Because the environment can no longer sustain its inhabitants, many young girls are plunged into prostitution in their quest for survival. Some of them find their way to the base of the expatriates in Bonny island and sell their bodies in order to send money to their families (35). As a result, they are exposed to all manners of obscenities and sexual abuse, including having bottles shoved into their vaginas in order to amuse their depraved customers (38). The vulnerable girls have become victims of domination, exploitation and subjugation by patriarchy. They are aware that they are victims of exploitation, yet they cannot extricate themselves from the quagmire because of the money and gifts they receive from their clients. Some of them even go as far as charming the white men in order to win their love and perhaps earn a ticket to their homeland. Similarly, it is evident that prostitution takes a toll on the lives of the young girls who pretend to be comfortable when they visit the village. Yellow narrates that some of the girls come back looking as though they had never left the village, making one wonder if they had somehow missed the city breeze (33). Also, when the younger girls craving city life would ask to be taken to town, the prostitutes will look at them in contempt and ask "you girls think that you can survive that life"(33). This shows that the girls go through unimaginable horrors in the quest to irk out a living.

The environmental damage is instrumental to the violation of the female in the novel. Zilayefa immediately loses her moral consciousness as soon as her mother's farmland is ruined. She becomes open to all sorts of things (39). She is constantly traumatized by the decadence in her environment and looks for every avenue of escape. Additionally, Yellow is plagued by... 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... (39). The protagonist is also agitated at the harrowing pain associated with having a daily bath because of the excruciating pain that slashes her private part as a result of the polluted water that she uses to take her bath. Zilayefa narrates that it was the same water that she excreted into that she drank. This paints a graphic picture of physical and environmental decadence. The kind that one cannot escape from because it has become a daily reality. Zilayefa ironically takes a bath with the oil that has become the source of her moral degeneration. It is on account of this oil that she has become vulnerable. This affirms Nkammebe's (2009) assertion that the woman

in Niger Delta faces many tragedies due to the oil richness of their land. They also live in fear, destruction, poverty, degradation, environmental deprivation and environmental destruction; flowing from irresponsible oil exploration, chemical pollution, gas flaring, high infant mortality, rape, dehumanization among others. The homologous violation of the environment and the exploitation of the woman is one of the key tenets of the ecofeminism theory. Kaine Agary highlights the patriarchal forces struggle for resource control. The decadence in the environment soon aborts Yellow's mother's dream of giving her daughter a good education. After her farmland is destroyed by crude oil, Zilayefa recounts the ruination of her mother's farmland: ... I saw the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning animals in its path... and so it was that in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance" (4). The oil spill incapacitates Zilayefa's mother and she can no longer fend for her daughter. This in turn makes Yellow desperate to find a means of survival. She becomes carried away by an antique furniture dealer named Sergio who has come to log timber from the forests in her village. Sergio uses Yellow as an object for satisfying his insatiable lusts and disappears the same way her father did -without a word. Yellow is devastated because she thought she had got "a way out of the village" (23). This illustrates that the objectification of the young girls in Niger delta as sex objects is as a result of the interlocking relationship between capitalist patriarchy and a volatile environment.

In a bid to escape from the socio economic quagmire assailing her village, Ziyalefa eventually migrates to Port Harcourt where she discovers that the white men whom they regard as a ticket to a better life were actually destructive forces. She narrates that "most of the young girls were looking to escape their poverty were looking to white men to rescue them. Every night girls trooped into the hotel lobby looking for a chance to snatch up a white man. Hundreds of girls left their villages to go to places like Warri or Bonny to snatch up a whitey (186). Ironically, most of these indigent young girls anticipating financial freedom end up with children whose paternity is unascertained. The protagonists refer to such children as "African Profits", "ashawo Pikin" and "father unknown" (171). Because the environment is no longer productive, women have become commodities who exchange sexual pleasure for a few currencies and unwanted pregnancies which exacerbate their problems. Thomas 2003, succinctly captures the plight of the young girls in this excerpt:

The multinational oil companies have been very brutal to the women behaving like animals as they take advantage of the poor illiterate girls of the Delta by making them victims of their lust... These girls inhabit creeks and villages separated by rivers and seas and have little contact with the outside world... due to their poor living conditions fall victims... to these men. At the end of their search and exploitation for oil, these workers leave the women behind with no contact address. They leave young unemployed mothers and kids (28).

From the aforesaid, it is glaring that the female folk are commodified because they are financially handicapped. It is as a result of this disenfranchisement that the female folk seek other means of surviving in the Delta. Thus, the woman's body becomes a site for pollution just like the environment. Nwahunnya (2011) rightly observes about the environmental quandary that the land is exploited so are the people (*From Boom to Doom*,xiii).

The relationship which develops between Zilayefa and the Admiral, who is old enough to be her father symbolizes exploitation engendered by the despoliation of the Niger Delta

environment. The young women are exploited in the same way that the environment is pillaged. The admiral is a symbol of patriarchy. He represents the bourgeoisies who live off the fortunes of the masses. He uses material wealth as a bait to lure Zilayefa and later impregnates her. Zilayefa confesses that she gave up her virginity to Admiral, thinking this will endear her to him. However, she is shocked to discover that Admiral only wanted her as a plaything and for sexual gratification. Admiral symbolizes the ruling elite who callously pursue gain at the expense of the masses. After he deflowers Zilayefa, he shrugs off her obfuscation with the following words: “you’re a woman don’t worry it gets better” (144). Furthermore, he treats Zilayefa as a commodity by paying her in advance to use her body. Zilayefa captures this scenario in the excerpt below:

... he reached under his seat and brought out a bundle of money which he handed over to me “for your running around,” I was taken aback. I refused to take the money but he insisted. So I thanked him and bolted out of his car. I was embarrassed. I was not expecting him to give me money... I questioned and reasoned, and still I was not comfortable with the bundle of money I had held in my hand (139).

This clearly delineates a male dominated environment where women are ‘instrumentalised’ and regarded as a means to an end. Shiva argues for a dismantling of ideologies that deny women the right to their own bodies and sexuality. She states concisely in her *Ecofeminism: Critique, Influence, Change* (2014) that: her aim is to go beyond this narrow perspective of patriarchy and hierarchies and to express our diversities in different ways; address the inherent inequalities in world structures which causes the north to dominate the south, men to dominate women and the frenetic plunder of evermore resources forever more unequally (2). Ecofeminists vehemently reject power-based and oppressive relationships and advocate for a society where women would be respected as women and men as men. They also prescribe healthy and egalitarian environment where everyone can thrive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined the interconnectedness between the woman and the environment and emphasized that the female is a first-hand victim of the degradation of the environment because she depends on the environment for survival. This paper also argues against the objectification of the woman and the environment and advocates for an egalitarian society where humanity recognizes the interconnection of all life and respects nature. The discourse also debunks power based relationships and argues for an egalitarian society where everyone is respected.

References

- Agary, K. (2006). *Yellow Yellow*. Dtalkshop.
- Awhefeada, S. (2013). Degraded Environment and Destabilized Women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*. In O. Okuyade (Ed.), *Ecocritical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* (pp. 95–108). African Books Collective.
- Mies, M., & Shiva, V. (2014). *Ecofeminism* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- Nkammebe, A. D. (2009). Addressing gender-based constraints and issues in attaining the millennium development goals in Nigeria. *POFSA 4th Annual National Conference*.
- Nwahunnaya, C. (2011). Introduction: From boom to doom - the Niger Delta in contemporary Nigerian literature. In C. Nwahunnaya (Ed.), *From boom to doom: protest and conflict in the literature of the Niger Delta* (pp. xiii–xxi). Springfield Publishers.
- Nwulu, S. (2016). *Deeper than the pipelines - oil exploitation in the Niger Delta and the legacy of Ken Saro-Wiwa*. Essay, Social Commentary. Retrieved January 24, 2021, from <http://www.selinanwulu.com/portfolio-1/2016/4/28/deeper-than-the-pipelines-oil-exploitation-in-the-niger-delta-and-the-legacy-of-ken-saro-wiwa>
- Sule, E. E. (2018). Sexualized body, exploited environment: a feminist ecocritical reading of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Christy Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*. *Journal of African Literature Association*, 12(2), 116–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2018.1503928>
- Thomas, J. (2003). Women and the challenges of the Niger Delta. In *Centre for Advance Social Sciences*.