

'Yellow' Environment and Women as Allegorical Despoliation: A feminist Ecocritical Reading of Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*

Davies Ufuoma

Department of Languages and Literature, Lead City University, Ibadan

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ABSTRACT

Environmental degradation and preservation have become a topical issue in academic and non-academic discourse. African literary critics, especially Niger Delta writers have responded to the discourse by deploying their works towards exposing environmental damages in the region, and to seek intervention for the Niger Delta people. This study examines the dual aesthetics of environmental despoliation and sexual exploitation, and demonstrates the women's responses to such anomalies. The representative novel of Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* is explored to discuss women's experiences in the region, when the environment is degraded. The author utilizes the ecofeminist framework to elucidate the nexus between environmental exploitation and sexist oppression, and recommends ways to promote an egalitarian society for women, and respect for the natural environment.

Key words: Niger Delta, sexism, ecofeminism, environment

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian literary writers are known to create from the socio-historical, political and cultural milieu of their environment in all genres of literature like drama, poetry and prose. Also, the discovery and exploration of crude oil in the Niger Delta of Nigeria has greatly informed their literature and it has arguably formed the basis for ecocritical consciousness in Nigerian literary space. Historically, the literary engagements of early writers from the Niger Delta have

shown diverse responses to environmental consciousness that is prevalent in the region, though in various degrees. A case in point is the poet and novelist, Gabriel Okara, who employed his artistic prowess to raise awareness of the realities of the Niger Delta ecospace. The imageries and poetic expressions that permeate his poems are immersed in the Niger Delta. The poem "The Fisherman's Invocation" and the 'Call of the River Nun' decries the pollution of the rivers, which makes the aquatic lives to become extinct, disrupts the economic activities of the people, whose means of livelihood is dependent on the river resources. He thus qualifies as an environmental advocate. J.P Clark is another renowned poet and playwright from the region, who deployed his works to expose the predicaments brought upon the oil rich, but ironically the economically and socio-politically disadvantaged people of the Niger delta. This is buttressed by Darah 2011:8 in his opinion that the poem "The Raft" by J.P Clark examines the challenges of the Niger Delta waterways and wetlands. Similarly, his environmental engagements can be gleaned in his play *The wives revolt*, which directs attention to issues of women, who are excluded from business activities, and sharing of compensation from oil companies. As a result, the women revolt against the men with devastating consequences on the family and individual lives. Clark's works like *All for Oil*, *The Wives Revolt*, *Song of a Coat*, *Full Tide*, *The*

Raft succinctly establishes the point that the exploitative effect of the twentieth century control of the palm oil trade in the region is not different from the twenty-first century exploitation of the same region through the misappropriation of her crude oil wealth.

Worthy of note is the engagement of female writers against such environment injustice in the region. Such female writers like Julie Okoh, Tess Onwueme, Ene Henshaw, including their male counterparts like Sam Ukala deploy their plays for human and environmental rights in the Niger Delta. Also, Novelists like Elechi Amadi's *The Great Ponds* and *the Concubine* explore traditional myths of his riverine environment. Similarly, Ken Saro Wiwa's works are poignant responses to the predicament of women in an exploited environment. The issue of women in relation to nature birthed the theory of ecofeminism. Environmental degradation is perhaps the most threat to women, especially with the increase in climate change. Shiva (1994) opines that matters of women and the environment explain why domination of nature is akin to the oppression of women. He submits that women experience the most effects of environmental degradation. The relationship between women and ecology in this study is targeted at consciousness raising of the plight of women as a reactionary movement to environmental degradation in the Niger Delta

The exploration and exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has had devastating consequences on the aquatic lives of the environment as well as the people. This unwholesome situation has drawn attention from writers and critics. Oil politics is what makes the literature of the Niger Delta a topical one. A noteworthy observation of the literature of the region from the colonial to the post-independence periods is the persistent genre of protest, where the literary writers bemoan the despoliation of the environment that made life more meaningful in the pre-colonial era. The renowned poet, Niyi Osundare

(1986) in his poem "Eye of The Earth" reminiscences on the past as ".....echoes of an Eden long departed, when the rain forest was terrifyingly green (XIV- XV). Nigerian Writers see it as an act of duty, a sacred mission to impart knowledge on social and cultural issue, which characterize society, thereby creating awareness in their readership. Tanure Ojaide is a case in point. His poetics advocate for environmental consciousness in the Niger Delta, while Ken Saro-Wiwa's works depict the wanton destruction of the region's eco-space. Hence Nigerian writers have continued to explore socio-economic, political and cultural issues which have emanated as a result of environmental destruction in the region.

In Nimino Basse's "We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood", there is an explication of economic crises as a result of oil politics in the Niger Delta. Ogbowei's "Song of Dying River" laments the extinction of aquatic fauna and flora, While, Ikiriko's "Oily Tears of the Niger Delta" bewails the emotional distress that has befallen the inhabitants of the region as a result of oil exploitation. Several other writers and poets like Okere, Nengi-Ilagha, Okpewho, J.P Clark, Tanure Ojaide, Hope Eghagha have learnt their voices to the diverse environmental challenges that captures the agony and pains that the Niger Deltans experience, on daily basis, as a result of exploration in the region. However, in the quagmire of diverse environmental challenges expressed by writers ranging from socio-economic, political, trado-cultural and religion, lies the intersection between the direct effect of environmental degradation on the plight of women, and their responses to such challenges. This discourse will form the thrust of the paper. This is even more significant, especially when feminine qualities of fertility, nature and nurture are culturally and literarily associated with both women and nature. Hutner (2010), supports this claim, when he asserts that the earth is portrayed in feminine terms. Nature is depicted as fertile, nurturing, seductive and

wild. (2). the connection between women and the environment is explored in creative ways such that issues of life and death are tied to nature. This is because according to (Shiva 1994), the domination of nature is akin to oppression of women. Worthy of note is the engagement of writers, poets and critics on challenges of women and environmental injustice. In the light of these submissions, the paper examines the aesthetics of environmental degradation on women, especially on their sexuality. Specific objectives include stratagem discussions of the consequences of environmental despoliation on the lives of people in the host communities, and the dual effects of this ecological exploitation on the sexuality of women. Ecofeminism discourse is engaged to establish the analogy in the dual exploitations of nature and women, as well as their responses to such anomalies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental degradation is a major consequence of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. The colossal impact of the damage is even more felt in the lives of the inhabitants of the region, especially women and children. There is the degradation of farmlands, rivers and homesteads by oil spillage and gas flaring wrought by activities of oil merchants in the region. African literary critics have responded to these challenges by engaging their creative works as media to protest against injustice in the delta region. One of such poignant environmental critic Niyi Osundare's "Eye of the Earth" exposes political corruption in Nigeria, with its negative effects on the masses. His works also portray thematic concerns on historical factors that necessitated environmental exploitation. What this implies is that Nigerian writers have been involved in discourses on ecology and the environment, which has been ongoing in history. Similarly, Asoo (2009) asserts that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* establishes the writer's deep consciousness of the environment in his thematic and stylistic

engagement of the storyline. African writers no doubt take nature matters seriously in their creative and academic writings, but many have also neglected the paradigms that inform much of global ecocriticism and ecofeminism. Nixon(2007) opines that Ken Saro Wiwa 's works expose the degradation of his Ogoni environment, with dire consequences on the lives of the people, there is no doubt that their literary engagements have aroused the eco critical consciousness in the body of literature from inception till date.

Ecofeminism arose as a result of inquiries about the affinity between women and nature. This is usually expressed in metaphorical expressions such as "Mother Earth", "Womb" and nurture. In the Niger delta, there is a growing awareness of the exploration by oil companies as evident in the works of Nigerian critics. Their works are aimed at playing an interventionist role, which Enchenim (2004) explains that these writers consider their works as a duty to create awareness, which involves knowledge impartation on the social and cultural phenomena which characterize society. (21) This collective consciousness and call to duty will form the crux of this paper, notable pioneer writers who contributed to the literature of the region in their written tradition include; Dennis Osadebay, Gabriel Okara, Ene Henshaw, Elech: Amadi and J.P Clark. Other poets from the region include Odia Ofeimum, Onookome Okome, Tanure Ojaide, Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, Ebi Yeibo, Hope Eghagha, Ezenwa- Ohaeto, to mention but a few who raised awareness on the dangers of environmental degradation. There are strident voices from the region with women. Female creative writers like Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Mabel Segun, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Adichie, have also challenged environmental degradation through thematic like the politics of marginalisation of women and exclusion. Much of their works have not interrogated the consequences of environmental despoliation on the sexual

wellbeing of the woman, bodily, emotionally and psychologically. For instance, Adichie's works explore environmental degradation in the context of the Nigerian Civil war. However a few other writers like Ifeoma Nwoye, Bina Nengi-Ilagha, Kaine Agary and others have used their works to demonstrate that women are mostly affected by environmental degradation. Their works have also portrayed the roles of women in the struggle against pollution, thus indicating that women have responded against environmental challenges and by extension the oppression of women. Okediran (2015), in his critical review of the novel *Oil Cemetery* expresses the need for communication between oil companies and their host communities, while excluding the effects of such dialogues.

Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminism is borne out of the inquiries into the affinity between women and nature. The term was first coined by Francois d' Eaubonne, a French feminist in her book- *Feminism of Death* (1974). Other scholars popularized it in their works such as Griffin's *Woman and Nature the Woman, Ecology and Roaring inside Her* (1978) and recently Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy: Western Perspective on what it is and why it matters* (2000). The Ecofeminist ideology seeks to promote respect for women and the natural environment. According to Birkeland (1993), Ecofeminism is depicted as a system of social movement that affects women, and seeks to examine the nexus between diverse issues like environmental pollution, economics, politics, health, racism, reproduction and agriculture. Although various ecofeminist writers defer in their views about the theory, they converge under the term ecofeminism, especially as it forms the connection between environmental despoliation and sexist oppression against women thus, there is a connection between ecology and feminist ethics that promotes the general

wellbeing of women in relation to the natural environment.

DISCUSSIONS

The plot narrative opens with a vivid depiction of a decrepit ecospace, which is achieved through a metaphoric representation of degradation of the environment in the novel. Environmental challenges of oil spillage, gas flaring, with its attendant effect of poverty, loss of livelihood, unemployment, loss of family and homesteads have had damaging effects on the lives of the inhabitants of Ubolu community. The protagonist, Rita reflects on the essence of the oil companies to their own communities. This is because oil spillage causes frequent farmland depletion and forest fires, as well as serious air pollution. It also poisons the earth, kills crops and plunges many farmers into deeper poverty. More serious is the contamination of rivers, which not only deprives fishermen of their living but causes a shortage of drinking water (Nwoye, 63).

The attendant consequence of this despoliation is achieved through a graphic portrayal of the environment that was once productive. Visual description of the environment is expressed in words like the thatched—roof village with the lush green forests, that had represented Ubolu for generations, is now been threatened into extinction through oil exploration. The resultant effect is especially on women is joblessness, poverty, hardship and suffering by the people, who lost their lives and properties to the pipeline explosion. Thus, rendering the men jobless and luring them into vices such as pipeline vandalism, robbery, kidnapping and oil bunkering. One of such consequence of environmental despoliation on the people of the region is pollution of the ecospace for instance Dr. Jeremiah an environmental advocate that bears witness to the plaintiff in court explains that the cases of oil spillage cause the emission of dangerous hydrocarbons, which are constituents of the crude oil that are released into the soil and water source,

thereby polluting the crops and aquatic lives for farming and domestic use. Similarly, there is the damage of biodiversity, which has affected every aspect of livelihood. Rita laments these consequences in her statements that their environment is totally polluted, our water is contaminated The rivers look like rivers of death Schools are dilapidated, bridges have collapsed and the people are dying (Nwoye 143).

Metamorphic expressions and symbolism such as 'rat holes and crocodiles depict the hopeless conditions of the people. Rat holes portray the dilapidated houses of the inhabitants of Ubolu Community, while the situation of the people is likened to crocodiles, to depict their struggle for survival, through the land that is being explored and exploited. Oil business in the region has led to political insecurity, loss of lives and properties, especially on the women. There is a strong link between environmental despoliation and the plight of the women in the novel. Their challenges stems from their sexuality, which is conceptualized as the biological composite of women. Prostitution has a direct link with the oil business and consequently environmental degradation. The plight of Binaebi, mother of the protagonist captures this point. Zilayefa expresses that during her school years, one of the pipe lines that runs through their village broke and spilt oil over hectares of land, causing bodily and psychological harm. It also caused loss of livelihoods and untold hardships on her family and other inhabitants of the village. The unfolding of the narrative shows a deep quest for economic liberation caused by oil spillage in the community. 'Yellow Yellow', which is the title of the novel, is also the name of the protagonist. The title summarizes the sexual liberatory quest for economic freedom, occasioned by the protagonist's mother, who had an illicit sexual contact with a Greek sailor, who abandons her. She migrates to Port Harcourth, but meet an equally hopeless situation. She was forced back to the village to fend for herself and her daughter,

Zilayefa. One major question of women's sexuality in the novel is the discussion around biracial children in the Niger Delta. Their births are a consequence of sexual relationships between the Niger Delta women and the foreigners who come to the region for oil business. Cases abound of female characters who have had sexual escapades with foreigners resulting in biracial 'Yellow Yellow' children. These children suffer like their mothers, from all forms of prejudices, stigmatization, depression, racial bias and even death. Derogatory names like 'African-profits', 'born-troways', 'father-unkowns' imply poignant stigmatization occasioned by contact with foreign oil merchants. The novelist decries the challenges of women from all forms of abuse and discrimination experienced by women in the region.

CONCLUSION

The paper explores the effects of environmental despoliation and its attendant effect on women. Narrative techniques of allegory, flashbacks and dialogues were deployed to establish the plight of women in the hands of foreign oil merchants in the region. Women are usually at the receiving end of such malaise, as a result of their sexuality. Thus, Kaine Agary depicts a sickening concept of "Yellow" to metaphorically express an environment and women, in dire need of redemption in the Niger Delta.

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