

Socioeconomic Exploitation in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*

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Abstract

This paper examines the exploitation of the natural resources found in the Niger Delta as it effects on the economic life of the youths in Agary's *Yellow Yellow*. It portrays the exploitative measures used by the eminent and the multinationals oil companies to oppress and silence the people of Niger Delta, which they use to oppress and silence the people of Niger Delta and uncovers the resistance and rebellion of the people. This study reveals the excruciating pain the people of the Niger Delta undergo as a result of oil exploration in the region. The study also examines the dimension of exploitof the multinational companies in partnership with the local chiefs on the people and their environment. This situation affects the youths, as it destroys their hope of a better future, leading them to commit crimes. This problem which requires urgent attention is explored in this study. The Marxist approach to criticism is adopted as the theoretical

framework and textual analysis used to explore the texts.

Keywords: Economy, Exploitation, Betrayal, Disappointment, Environmental Degradation

Introduction

The discovery of crude oil in large quantity in January 15, 1956 in the Niger Delta region precisely in Oloibiri in Rivers State, placed Nigeria among the rank of oil producing countries in the world, and it brought lots of revenue for the country. Prior to the discovery of crude oil in Nigeria, agriculture was the means of the country's revenue as the nation exported cash crops like palm oil, palm kernel, rubber and so on to other countries. As a result of oil discovery in the Niger Delta region, multinational companies began to invest in the country, which resulted to exploitative measures and environmental pollution.

The Niger Delta region is of tremendous strategic and economic importance to Nigeria. This is because Nigeria's main strategic economic resources, oil and gas are concentrated in the region and since these minerals constitute the country's economic livewire, the Niger Delta region could rightly be regarded as the key to Nigeria's economic prosperity and greatness.

While the presence of these huge reserve of oil and gas turned the .Niger Delta into the most important source of revenue for Nigeria, the exploitation of these resources have been carried out in such unsustainable manner that not only are people denied the benefits derived from their own land, but their very means of livelihood and sustenance have been threatened thereby.

In spite of the stupendous wealth that have accrued from decades of oil activities and production in Nigeria, there is surprisingly, little or no attention given to the development of the region. There is no doubt, however, that oil pollution from oil

activities has clearly and seriously damaged the environment and the livelihood of those living in the oil producing communities.

The moist damp and humid forest within the lowland rain forest environment is home of such crops like cassava, yam, banana, pepper which are grown by the people for their basic subsistence. As the incessant spill occurs, it spreads into farmlands, and water bodies. The toxic seeps into the ground and is taken up by the plants' root.

Furthermore, as most of the spills are accompanied by fire, most of the impacted area is completely degraded leaving only thick encrusted earth which is black in colour. As a result of these activities, tensions have arise among the people because of environmental degradation that has polluted and destroyed both land and water within the Niger Delta region by various chemical and gas flares, even the atmosphere is congested with these chemicals that are harmful to human body.

Since then, various responses as a result of environmental pollution, economic exploitation and mostly negligence of government dominate the literature of the Niger Delta. Literature is very important and crucial to our development. A good number of literary -works have been born out of tensions in the region. For every society to survive and withstand the test of time, it must have literature that preserves its experiences. Literary artists throughout the region have presented to us aspects of the struggles of the people, their experiences, hopes, despair which fill their hearts in sharp contrast with what the media display. As Onookome Okome observes, "the tales coming out of Niger Delta are not evidence of dead dreams. Rather, they are examples of dreams which the suffering people are trying to make into reality" (qtd in Darah 23).

Through their works, we are to feel the plight of the people whose means of livelihood like farming and fishing have been cut

because of environmental pollution caused by the oil companies. This situation has warranted many literary artists and critics to engage in a battle in order to sensitise and criticise the government. Writers like Sam Ukala, Camillus Ukah, Grace Usifo, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Hellon Habila, Isidore Okpewho etc throughout their works have examined the experiences of the people. In a conversation with Ezechi Onyerionwu, Ojaide explains that:

... his point of view is to touch peoples mind about what is happening in Niger Delta through imaginative reconstruction of episodes, events and situations. And these issues should draw sensitivity to ideas about the environment and society which concern everybody. . . (36).

One of the major reasons why we should approach the Niger Delta crises from literary and intellectual perspective is, according to Onookome Okome in a conversation with Ezechi Onyerionwu, "to understand a problem, there is the need .to have an intellectual understanding in order to solve it" (617). Creative literature by writers has increased their pressures on the society, calling for a consideration of environmental laws and rights of the people. Also, these writers examine the effects this issue has on the younger generation, who feel trapped and look for a way of escape.

In the words of Psalm Chinaka, "the case of environmental and ecological menace by multinationals... has led to the formation of resistant youths groups..." (Chinaka 28). Therefore, the land is the major factor in which other issues like political and economic security are hinged on.

Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* is directed specifically towards x-raying the environmental problems faced by Niger Delta communities. These showed their relevance by portraying

the social and political ills, such as evils of military government, marginalization, poverty, prostitution, abuse of power, lack of press freedom, and environmental pollution in the work.

There are different kinds of literary theories, but this research is going to base its analysis on Marxist theory. It believes that literary works are written out of experiences which could be historical, political, economic or social to expose society's ill, then seek a solution for a change.

Marxist theory is an example of socialist theory that is known for its struggle for change. It is named after the propounder Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. This theory was introduced into literary criticism for it supports socialism; how we relate with each other for the achievement of change.

This theory is so broad that it attracted many critics who give their own different definitions of the theory. Marxist theory believes that class struggle is the bases of historical development. In Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx writes that history of hitherto existing society is the history of class Struggle.... The modern bourgeoisie country that has now sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with antagonism. It has established new classes, new conditions of oppression and new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. Terry Eagleton in his *Marxism and Literary Criticism* writes "that Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies, the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times" (14). Marxism is political, it examines the different classes of people, the attitudes of the leaders to the general masses.

While Marxism stands for the destruction of the capitalist state and has as its aim in the withering away of the state all forms of institutionalized violence, Marxism not only supports the right of the working class to exercise a domination over bourgeoisie,

they actively fight for that.

The society from which an artist rises always in most cases informs the issue he writes about. It is truth that literature is not created in a vacuum as it mediates on social and political issues that the artist grapples within his existence. Charles Bressler gives vents to the above when he says:

Society shapes our consciousness ;that social and economic conditions directly influences how we believe and value things that Marxism offers us an opportunity and a plan for changing the world from apathy of bigotry, hatred and conflict resulting from class struggle to useless society, where wealth, opportunity and education are actually visible for all. (115)

From the above, we can infer that the writer is an active participant of his society and by extension recreates the collective experiences of the people. Africa experience transcends the concept of "Art for Art Sake" theory in which it thrives and emerging into a moralistic light in question of societal practices.

This research is taking its base from Terry Eagleton's view in *Marxand Literary Criticism*, where he posits that what Marxism has to deliver story in the struggle of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation -oppression, in other words, Marxist theory is based on Class struggle between the two different groups of the society. It shows a society where the lower class struggles to survive in a capitalist society that celebrates, favours and maintains the power of the upper class (bourgeoisie) that oppress the poor in a society'. Marxism after examining social organisation perceived human history to have consisted of a organisation of struggle between classes; the oppressed and the oppressor. The theory goes further to explain that the ultimate driving force involving the distribution of

resource's, gain production and such matter was "historical materialism". Kaine Agary opines that, to be in a society that is characterized by Social stratification, featuring the upper class (oppressor) and the lower class (oppressed). This they portray in their novels, the marginalization of the lower class and the exploitation of their resources subjecting them to abject poverty.

Kaine Agary is famous for her commitment to using literature to bring the travails of the Niger Delta people to light. The desire to change the Niger Delta situation to a better one has been the role of the writers in the region; this is essentially what forms Agary's *Yellow Yellow* - they use art to espouse an alternative order in the Niger Delta and Nigeria in general.

In Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, the presentation of Zilayefa's mother shows how the discovery of crude oil and its activities have brought about numerous problems to the people of Niger Delta. We see in the novel the degradation, exploitation and squandering of riches by very few individuals. Zilayefa's mother is said to have had life planned out through her farming. She has the dream of moving up the ladder in life, but this dream is shattered as a result of oil spillage that totally burns down her farm.

Agary presents a organisation of Struggle in the characters of Zilayefa and the village boys who strive to survive the oppression melted on their society by the oil companies and the local Chiefs who are being bribed by the exploiters in order to protect their interest. They stand out to cause as much havoc, as possible, until the government takes interest in the plight of the Niger Delta. This they do by oil bunkering and kidnapping of oil companies executives.

In conclusion, therefore one of the functions of literature is to make the populace aware of social ills, and it should be sympathetic to action that will wipe those ills away. Marxist

theory operates a warning system that alerts the readers to social wrongs, it is a mentor to the proletariat pointing out how they can free themselves from the powerless position in which they are to aim at replacing, the existing, system with socialist ones. This is what Lukacs calls "reflectionalism". Achebe in his *Morning Yet on Creation Day* posits that modern African literature is based on contemporary human experiences; in order to remain relevant, and any writer who tries to avoid the big social and contemporary African situations will end up being irrelevant. The primary text shows the disillusionment and exploitation occurring in the Niger Delta region. Events in the text calls for unity among the people to take charge of their resources and create a better life for themselves.

Socioeconomic Exploitation in Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* examines critically the conditions of women in the contemporary society of Nigeria, especially in the Niger-Delta area where women are seen as objects that can be used and dumped.

Zilayefa, a young girl of Greek and Nigerian parentage, leaves her rustic existence and the protected grip of her mother in the village in search of a better life in the city. With a recommendation from her church pastor, she is taken in and sheltered by Sisia, an elderly woman, and her young friend, Lolo.

Zilayefa is thrust into bustling city of Port Harcourt, unprepared for the pitfalls awaiting a young girl very unsure of herself and in desperate need of direction. In Port Harcourt, Zilayefa is confronted by the prejudices against her racial identity. She is devoid of an encouraging socialisation she wants in the city because of bias that has gripped the society. She struggles with accepting the void left by not knowing her father and tries to fill that void with the attention of an older lover. Through the experience of her budding sexuality, Zilayefa grows to a higher

level of knowledge and understanding and defines for herself what a girl's life has to be, most especially a girl of her age.

The story has its main setting in an African country, Nigeria. There are some sub-settings like Port Harcourt, the start where Zilayefa's mother is when she meets Zilayefa's father who is a Greek. This is also the place where Zilayefa spends most of her lifetime as a grown girl in search of a better life in the city. This is the period during the Niger-Delta crises which leads to girls, like Zilayefa, to thrust into the city in search of a comfortable place of settlement.

Zilayefa is a child got from an illicit affair of a Greek man and an Ijaw woman. Zilayefa's mother Bibi is entrusted with the hard task of solely bringing up a child without a helper because her man whom he meets when she is eighteen years old when working as a secretary in the oil company, leaves her for his home place, Zilayefa grows up without knowing her father as she would always like to know her father, but her mother has always been discouraging her from asking questions about her father. *Zilayefa* is known by the name Lage by her parent and her friends and relations.

One day a nobleman, Chief Semoke, dies in Lagos and is brought back in his village to be buried. During the funeral ceremony, Zilayefa runs into a man, Sergio, who comes home for the burial of the late Chief Semoke with his friend Tarilabo. Sergio was an antique-furniture dealer from Spain who travels extensively for his business and has met Tarilabo on one of his business trips. With time Zilayefa knows more about Sergio and wants to follow him go to the city as all apertures of her thought are consumed with what the city life can be.

Being too workaholic and diligent when it comes to running ordinary home errand, Zilayefa is absolutely prolific to her mother. At studies too, she is more serious, which makes Mr Diseye to count her as one of the erudite ones in her class. Zilayefa

leaves the farming and fishing occupation that her mother is doing to make sure she never lacks in any aspect of her life and decides to go to the city without having a static and definite thing she is going there to do which makes her to say, "to try my luck." Her mother objects to this notion but all her attempts to stop Zilayefa from going to the city proves failed as she remembers her own situation eighteen years ago. After eight days of silence, her mother accepts and goes to her church pastor who recommended Pastor Ikechukwu to take care of Zilayefa when she reaches Port Harcourt. Zilayefa is given a great deal of advice by her mother and Mama Ebiye which they believe will change her life for better and suggest that she travels secretly.

At Port Harcourt, she meets Pastor Ikechukwu who now introduces her to the woman that will take care of her, Sisi, an elderly matriarch and her friend Lolo. Sisi takes Zilayefa home and introduces her to Clara and Esther who disclose to her that she is a JJC—Johnny Just Come—who is eager to peace and easy to yield. She is later sent to Mr Moses by Sisi who now offers her a job in a hotel as a waitress. She later discovers a friend, Emem, who is unlike her and they discuss so many things about themselves. Emem is a Calabar girl who is nurtured and brought up in Port Harcourt. Her mother did the same as Zilayefa's mother who is a trader in Port Harcourt. She was renamed "Pussycat" just as Zilayefa is nicknamed "Yellow-Yellow."

Zilayefa now starts to experience so many good and bad things in the city as -he came to the city naively. She purposely gets inundated in the extravagant aspects of life as she learns how to drive. She sees how the white men come to Port Harcourt and mess around with girls and thereby producing so many mixed breeds in the city, her mother later writes her to make sure she is well and reminding her all that she has to know. She later travels by air to Lagos through the help of Damiete who is Lolo's leer.

During the sixtieth birthday of one of Lolo's father's friend,

she runs into another man, Admiral, who is introduced to her by Lolo as Retired Admitf Kenneth Alaowei Amalayefa or Admiral, Uncle Ken. Admiral is a married man who is blessed with children but is still a philanderer. He is a handsome old man whom Zilayefa likens and pictures as being as old as her father. At first, Zilayefa sees Admiral as being too old to be her lover but after-being inordinately and badly advised by Emem, she capitulates to Admiral's demands of being his lover. Finally, Zilayefa surrenders her virginity to Admiral. She is now turned to a full woman by Admiral and flourishes her with anything she wants as she has forgotten her mother's advice and the intention of her coming to the city, which is to get educated.

She is now in her damnable aspect of life, as she has never thought well. On this particular stance, she now tries to immerse herself into every extravagant aspect of life as she is only interested in having fun. She later discovers that her period has ceased and after much consultation, she discovers that she is pregnant. She tells Admiral about it and he recommends a clinic for her. Zilayefa later meets Sergio. Though her love for Sergio is not as strong as it is on the first day she met him, she makes no mistake of sleeping with him. Being at a city, she no more remembers her education, which has been put to a stop by either Sergio or Admiral. She later aborts the child after she has taken some plants recommended for her.

In *Yellow-Yellow*, Kaine Agary presents to us the current predicament of women in the Niger-Delta, how they are treated negatively by human and environmental factors for the Niger-Delta women. Environmental sustainability is fundamental to their overall wellbeing and development. The environment is important to these women living in poverty not only because their existence to a large extent relies on substantial endeavours, which depend on natural resources, but also they perceive that their wellbeing is tied to their environment in terms of livelihood, health, vulnerability and the ability to control their lives.

These poor women are more vulnerable to the changes in the environment in part because social, political and economic exclusion means they almost have fewer choices about where they live. In *Yellow-Yellow*, women bear the brunt of natural hazards, loss and the depletion of forest, polluted air, water and soil and the negative impacts of industrial activities. Zilayefa laments that:

The day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day u, dream for me started to wither but she carried on watering it with hope. The black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unravelled the treads that held together her fantasies for me (10).

In her novel *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary shows her daughter as Yellow-Yellow because of her hit-and-run sexual escapade of a Greek father who the mother only knows by name. Zilayefa's mother tries to ensure that her daughter's life does not take similar unfortunate path as hers did and so everything is done to protect her. She does everything to programme her daughter for success through formal and informal education that had eluded her. Zilayefa her daughter gets into the same ditch that her mother wanted her to get away from. Zilayefa sees herself with pregnancy not for the playboy which expatriate but for native sugar daddy who she sees as a father, dumping her like whites, as she cry thus:

My mother took care of all my needs, went far to make sure that I got education. She used to tell me that I would be better than her, that aslong as I was educated, I would be able to take care of myself. She sacrifices everything to make sure I went to school.

In the novel, Agary portrays women as not having any option but to sell their bodies to men, especially the foreign oil expatriates who use young ladies as nothing but sex bags. 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 whity. Some girls from

my town did that in order to send money home.

Even when they are lucky enough to find a mistress, "the mistress would beat them daily, deny them food, and after years of service send them back to the villa without having improved their lives, as promised." At home, men expect the women to suffer and cater for the basic needs of the family. The woman is oppressed when she fails to do this. Men demanded a healthy meal when they were hungry, disregarding the fact that the women had to work extra kilometer to get firewood or cultivate and harvest the food now fertilised by their sweat and blood. More so, at home and at the communal levels, the women are discriminated against. They are not allowed: participate or contribute to societal issues, even if it concerns them.

However, the men claim that according to tradition, it was their exclusive right to make all the decisions inside and outside the home. They draw the line for women, particularly in communal meetings on various town issues. This discrimination or denial is born out of the idea and fear that women, if given chance as thus:

If we allowed women free access to this meeting, they reasoned, where would it end? The next thing, they would want to do is mount their men in the bedroom or question their husband's decision. No real man could accept that (40).

This discrimination did not exist at the communal level alone. In home economics, the men never allowed the women to decide or contribute on how money should be spent. Those women who dared were beating heavily.

Agary in her novel *Yellow-Yellow* portrays men being encouraged in the region to take advantage of their oil wealth to engage in sexual intercourse with many young girls. In Niger-

Delta, foreign oil expatriates and local men see young girls as nothing but sex bags that they can use and dump. Admiral fell in love with Zilayefa (Yellow-Yellow) after promising her heaven and earth that he will take care of everything to make her succeed in life, being old enough to be her grandfather. She agrees to love him because she loved Admiral and allow him take her virginity. Admiral turns her down when she was pregnant. He only gives her money to see Dr George for abortion. This shows that she is nothing to him except for sexual gratification. Yellow-Yellow says thus:

There was no room for a discussion. He did not ask whether I wanted to keep the child or not. He did not care, and if I kept the baby, I was definitely on my own. Admiral did not have any time to commit to me again (163).

Like Sergio keeping his family in faraway Spain and sit back here in Nigeria to exploit young girls whom no doubt will never marry. Rather, they dump the girls even after they impregnate them, the men believe that money can make everything. Zilayefa remembering the sweet voice of Sergio promising to be with her and not believing he can leave his family to anybody else.

Kaine Agary in her novel *Yellow-Yellow* and her unique manner portrays women in the Niger-Delta. Before now, youths, especially male folk, have been the ones crying out of the Nigerian nation about their continued economic, socio and political marginalisation. Agary shows us the dehumanisation, disillusionment and exploitation of the Niger-Delta women and that women are the major victims of the effect of oil exploitation in the region. Agary puts the suffering of women in the hands of the reign oil expatriates and in the hands of local men who discriminate, subjugate and relegate women to the background. Then, many questions come to her mind:

I had wanted to understand what it was besides money that mad beautiful twenty year old girls look at their short, fat, ugly fifty-eight year old men and then men called them "born-throways," "ashawo-pickins' and father unknown" (171).

However, what these men failed to understand in the view of many feminists like Agary and others is that the women come from the man's ribs, not from his feet to be walked upon; not from his head to be superior, but from his side to be equal in treatment and opportunity. Women suffer discrimination; they are often called or labelled witches just because of their appearance. Agary laments that women with distended belies that look like pregnancy caused by urine fibroids were confined to their rooms because a diviner "who is a man" had said or confirmed them to be witches.

Agary shows women in riverine areas and their exportation by oil expatriates, that is, the oil companies and men of the region, using young girls as nothing but sex bags. If the women of this region will sit and think about their future, like Zileyafe did when she saw herself in a situation she did not want in life. Also, women should stand together to fight for the equal opportunity with their male counterparts.

Conclusion

This paper explored how the people are exploited, especially economically, in contemporary African Society with special reference to Nigeria. Kaine Agary views women in Niger Delta as being exploited by the oil expatriates as nothing but sexual bags.

Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* has taken our attention away from the stories of militancy and violence and in turn focus on the

life of ordinary woman in the Niger Deltta and people who try to survive the economic, physical environment and politics of the Niger Delta. In all these men see them as just sexual objects meant for their pleasure.

However, women should be given equal opportunities because they will contribute to the growth of the area, despite all these sufferings and rejection, we see the character of Sisi and Lolo who through their creativity and hard work are able to acquire great wealth for themselves despite their level of education. Unlike Admiral who used his wealth to exploit ladies, Lolo and Sisi uses their own wealth in human development. They adopted and brought up Zilayefa as if she is their relative and Sisi employed Clara as a sales girls in her shop finally. Agary's novel has opened our eyes to see how women in the Niger Delta are discriminated on the part of the local men and white men who usewomen as no thing: but sexual machines and objects money can buy.

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