

## **Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*: An Eco-feminist Bildungsroman Novel**

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### ***Abstract***

*Bildungsroman tradition of the novel genre has been a popular style of the English Literature. Though it took its modern flesh in Germany, it later became the choice of major English novelists: Charles Dickens, Jane Austen and even novelists before them. African written literature is, unarguably, an inherited accoutrement from the formal education system. There is no doubt therefore, that African novelists also inherited the English Bildungsroman experimentation. As a result, a number of African novels are obviously Bildungsroman as their protagonist have “developmental trajectory” either from childhood or adolescence to maturity; or in a simple term, they possess Bildungsroman structure. What are not clear are the intent and the utilitarian function(s) of such narratives. This work proves that African Bildungsroman, like most other African novels could be revolutionary – advocacy tool for social, political, economic and ecological change. It is a tool for creating the needed awareness, agitation and protest. This has been demonstrated using Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. The novel is an eco-feminist Bildungsroman – a novel that pursues feminist quests on the one hand, and advocates ecological conservation on the other hand. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis is applied to interrogate the novel, depicting that repression from the environmental effects and mental development of an individual, his life and the choices he/she makes in life. The novelist is seen to have surreptitiously demanded*

*paradigm shift (revolution) in many respects as it affects Niger Delta people and environment, particularly their women who are the major victims of various evils emanating from the activities of oil expatriates in the region.*

**Keyword:** *bildungsroman, revolution, eco-feminism, Yellow-Yellow, psychoanalysis*

## **Introduction**

The concept of Bildungsroman as a tradition of the novel genre and as a literary term is traceable to the Germanic story of a young male who undergoes formation. Kathleen Kuiper (1995:139) defines it as “a class of novel in German literature that deals with the formative years of the main character”. Bildungsroman is coined from two German words: *Bildung* meaning “formation/education” and *roman* meaning “novel.” This type of novel is literally known as a novel of formation/education. As a type of novel, Bildungsroman has its defined structures. It is the adherence to the known “constituent elements” or characteristics that determine whether a novel is categorized as a Bildungsroman or not; and these characterise a specialist’s definition and criticism. Petru Golban and Derya Benli (2015:2) define Bildungsroman as “a type of biographical/autobiographical fiction that renders the process of growth and formation of a character in his/her both biological and intellectual development from childhood till early maturity.” On the structure, Cecelia Carey notes that contemporary Bildungsroman novels have now “focused on a general plot in which the narrative has tended to show a purposeful young boy or girl advancing toward some clarity and stability in life” (2021:3-4).

We may then ask, “What is the essence of the Bildungsroman?” Or does the writer of a Bildungsroman have a vision or some objectives to achieve via his/her writing? Charles Nnolim argues that an African writer is a patriot, whose work is aimed at having a decent, peaceful, and progressive society. Therefore, he/she is “revolutionary or reformist in orientation” (2019:255). The position of this work is that Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* is a revolutionary novel. Gizachew Tiruneh sees revolution as a quest that transforms an existing socio-economic and political order. He further identifies what he calls “sociopsychological theory of evolution, which argues that revolution is the effect of expectation against social reality. He suggests, therefore, that “revolutionary situations seem to occur when massive and rapid social, economic, and political factors reshape the people’s socio-political value systems and affect their economic welfare” (T2014:9). Muhammad Askari (2010) makes a philosophical submission of what revolution entails. He rejects the traditional and political belief that revolution is fundamentally a case of bloodshed, destruction, and change of power or social structure, even though it often involves bloodshed. He states thus:

The true meaning of revolution is that the order of life, which no longer serves any purpose, should change, replaced by a new order that is more in consonance with the new conditions. True revolution does not just imply political or economic change; first and foremost, it is a change in the system of values; a change not just in society’s external structure but also in its heart and mind and everything else. True revolution is psychological. It gives birth to a new man (2010:153-153).

Askari identifies two groups of revolutionary literary writers: one identifies the ills of the prevalent system, but then, for being in love with the old order, they loath a change, and of course, do not suggest alternative(s). The second group comprises “writers who know at a conscious level what new values need to replace the old ones. At least they point, even if unconsciously, in the direction of new values (2010:153-154). *Yellow-Yellow* satisfies the two set criteria of revolutionary novel because it identifies the ills and also points at new values that need to replace the existing status quo. The novelist does not in any way conceal her intent of effecting paradigm shift in the Niger Delta society.

Kaine Agary, by this novel, has successfully subscribed to the league of eco-feminists. This follows her trio-focal concern. She engages us with the dangers our unhealthy and reckless actions on the ecosystem pose to human survival and that of the earth; a review of gender relations; and a change of political and cultural norms. All these are within the purview of eco-feminism. For clarity, eco-feminism, in the words of Sarah Regan (2020) in her essay, “What Is Ecofeminism? Understanding the Intersection of Gender and the Environment” is “an ideology and movement that sees climate change, gender equality, and social injustice more broadly as intrinsically related issues, all tied to masculine dominance in society” (<https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/ecofeminism-history-and-principles>). In fact, the idea is developed on the principle of prioritisation of qualities considered to be masculine such as domination, especially by those who hold power. It is an offshoot eco-criticism, a term derived by combining ecology (the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats) and criticism. According Meyer Howard Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham

(2012:98), eco-feminism is “the analysis of the role attributed to women in fantasies of the natural environment by male authors, as well as the study of specifically feminine conceptions of the environment in the neglected nature writings by female authors.” In other words, it is a marriage of ecological literary aesthetics and feminist ideologies in a literary text (prose, poetry, and drama), whereby the beleaguered image of the woman is juxtaposed with that of the exploited and dying ecology.

*Yellow-Yellow* is a psychological novel. The conflict is founded on the psychological and social quest: quest for freedom, social dignity, and pleasure. The basis for the quest is the fact that Laye feels deprived and suppressed. Psychologically, therefore, she is under intense pressure to achieve her desires. In other words, Laye is “sick.” That is the focus of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a Sigmund Freud’s theory that offers interpretations to human psychology as the cause of human actions. It is Freud’s view that civilisation is made possible because of repression of human desires. That implies that for society to thrive, every human being has to undergo repression of what he calls “pleasure principle” by the “reality principle.” The repressed pleasure (which hope of the individual is to recoup later in life) when becomes excessive to the individual will “make us ill” (Eagleton 2008:132). The fact that Laye is exploited/deprived, whom her deprived natural instincts or desires in the unconscious overtime is now left “sick” and “uncanny”, makes her experiential metaphor of the Niger Delta people and their environment. Therefore, her yearnings and search for cultural, political, and socio-economic change are metaphors of the envisioned revolutionary pursuits of the novelist.

## II

The novel, *Yellow-Yellow*, is a story of Laye (Zilayefa), a seventeen year old secondary school leaver, and an only daughter of an Ijaw woman (Binaebi), who had gone to Port Harcourt in search of a greener pasture during her youth, but is incidentally impregnated by Admiral, a fellow Ijaw. Laye has been longing to know the man from whom she inherits her complexion that earns her the popular name “Yellow-Yellow.” She also wants to escape the boredom of her local community for a city, and so decides to travel out of the village to Port Harcourt. That is after her mother’s farmland is lost to crude oil spill and they are finding it very difficult to eke out a living. Unfortunately, Laye’s quest to know her father gradually slides her into unquenchable desire for male relationship that eventually ruins her dream of greatness and her mother’s long and persistent efforts to recoup her dignity through her.

Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* is her literary experimentation on the experiences associated with crude oil exploitation in the Nigerian oil-rich Niger Delta region and its countless destructive consequences on the people of the area, but with special interest in the plight of the womenfolk as victims. It is Agary’s attempt to explore the complex ecological, economic, and cultural bastardisation of Niger Delta occasioned and perpetrated against the indigenous people of the region. Unfortunately, these illicit and criminal activities of international oil companies are seen to have been tacitly approved by the federal government of Nigeria. That makes the matter worse. In reference to Nigerian government’s role, Chinyere Nwahunanya (2018:xiv) regrets that “it is the activities of fellow human beings who happen to control the power that shares that wealth that have pauperised the region’s indigenes, and ensured that any voices of dissent are either muffled or

silenced.” This is another angle to the pathetic story of a beleaguered region that has seen the murder of their nationalist voices: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Adaka Boro, and others, who at one time or the other have raised their voices of protest and resistance against the unimaginable loss and anomie threatening the existence of the Niger Delta people. The existential threat is brought about by the hostile activities of oil companies operating there, both on lands and in waters. One direct effect of the continued presence of the expatriate oil workers and their activities is the imminent moral decay and cultural erosion. Disturbing as these may be, Agary is inspired to demand a change of the subsisting norms for a new order – a system that will leave no one hurt or displaced.

As a Bildungsroman, the novel is a developmental trajectory of Laye as a young girl undergoing mental transformation. It begins with exposition of Laye as a deprived and depressed girl in her local community. She is portrayed to have been ill. Her illness (sickness) emanates from excessive repression of her desire of knowing her father (complex), being free from her mother’s restrictions, social and economic fears of her future. It is these that drive and determine her character in the novel. There are a lot of instances in the novel that affirm these as her illness, which later actions are the “neurotic symptoms.” For example; explaining her thoughts about Sergio the Spaniard lover, she says, “I thought he would come to me and rescue me from my colourless existence” (Agary 2006:21). Elsewhere she emphasises, “I simply wanted a way out of the village” (Agary 2006:23). Then, sharing her thoughts about education, she affirms that she is under intense and unbearable repression – “I needed to go somewhere, do something besides the daily chores of village life that threatened to choke me to death” (Agary 2006:33).

Freud argues that unaccomplished pleasures are pushed to a “house” he calls the unconscious. The repressed desires remain under the radar of ego – the part of human psyche that censors the desire to ensure it is socially acceptable; that is, it mediates between the unconscious and reality. The unconscious, according to Freud, are sublimated, meaning that they are “directed towards a more socially valued end” (Eagleton 2008:132). But then, while waiting for the more socially valued end to be achieved, they manifest in various ways in the life of the victim as neurotic symptoms, which include dreams, jokes, mislaying, slips of tongue, etc. A lot of these symptoms abound in the novel as exhibited by Laye.

On the day Kamal takes her and Lolo to Takwa Bay during their visit to Lagos, we see her id at play again as she refers to Kamal and Lolo as a “couple” and wishes to enjoy the experience; and since she cannot accomplish that instantly, she escapes into her memories.

My mind went to the evening I spent with Sergio on Wokiri Island. Instead of the resentment and anger that I felt after he abandoned me, I longed for the warmth of his kiss. His embrace, his heartbeat, his fingers tracing over my arm, the butterflies in my stomach – I was reliving it all until Aliyu jolted me back to reality (Agary 2006:93-4).

The relationship between Admiral and Laye has no better explanation than the instinctual desire for the phallus, which Freud calls Oedipus complex. Explaining the concept, Rivkin and Ryan (1998:119) state that “Freud argues that our mental lives derive largely from biological drives, that the highest achievements and ideals of civilisation are inseparable from instinctual urges towards

pleasure, constancy, and the release of excitation and energy.” Laye walks into the relationship, not because she is blind to the impending imminent failure, but for the compulsive biological drive – her complex. She admits, “I felt a deep sense of longing for him, not because of the comfort Emem hinted at, which was money, but because I was hoping that the relationship would give me a taste of paternal affection that I had never had” (Agary 2006:138). She further attests, “I was involved in something I was not ready for, and although it was early enough to change my mind and opt out, I found myself drawn to Admiral like a fly to a gourd of palm wine” (Agary 2006:139).

Since Laye does not achieve her expectation of fulfilled excitation with Admiral that first night, she appreciates and has serious longing for him, the desired pleasure is then repressed to the unconscious. Freud’s theory is that while asleep, the repressed material by-passes the ever vigilant censorship of the ego and finds expression in dreams. This offers interpretation to the experience of Laye that night as “I dreamt of Admiral that night” (Agary 2006:140). Other neurotic betrayals are her attitude that morning: her loss of appetite to eat; unhappy feeling; morose look at workplace; etc.

Laye’s compulsive drive is both obsessive and phobic. She is too emotionally attached to Admiral that their companionship has become a fountain of health. Contrarily, their apartness breeds apprehension and discomfort that she could lose him to another woman, perhaps a girl. She confesses thus:

One can say sickness or wellness is in the mind, so when I was able to see Admiral, I felt very good. I know he was busy, but I could not help but wonder if he had moved on to another young girl (Agary 2006:159)

It can be said that her emotional illness has caste delusion onto her rational reasoning; hence “I looked at him, and I could not find any softness in his face. His boyish countenance with the dimples looked more like a frightening apparition” (Agary 2006:162).

From the foregoing, therefore, Laye is a victim of repressed compulsive instinctual drives due largely to her environmental or naturalistic factors. The circumstances of her birth occasioned by oil exploitation in her Niger Delta region has devastating imprint on the psyche of her mother, who becomes stricter than usual to shield her only daughter from the pervading destructive environmental influences is the root cause of the neurosis. Of this influence of the environment on the psyche of the individual human, Scott (1979:69) states:

Literary Naturalism...had presented an image of man as a victim of environment and/or biology. Freudian ideas substantiated these insights, offering a “scientific” terminology by which to interpret man’s bondage to his libidinous compulsions, or to the repressions society forced upon him. The Freudian judgement – that man is sick rather than villainous – fit neatly with the Naturalist’s refusal to condemn a being who was not responsible, but was the dupe of natural and preterhuman forces.

Laye has to repress a lot of her libidinous desires, especially the essential paternal influence during her pre- and stages. The effect is that these repositories we know as the unconscious begin to overwhelm the ego in her daily social living, making her a sick and split self.

*Ab initio*, we are piqued with the prevailing traumas oil exploitation brings to Niger Delta people. The implications are the maggots of prostitution and unwanted pregnancy, moral decay, violence, hunger, social alienation, and in fact, anomie; and the consequences fall most on the shoulders of women in any case. Agary lays her blames on the country's leaders and expatriate oil workers, who are jointly accountable for the gradual killing of the natural environment, and other attendant inhuman activities perpetrated in that region, as a result of oil prospection.

We are never told the circumstances that made Binaebi (Laye's mother) move to Port Harcourt, but by inference, it is clear she travelled to Port Harcourt because she finds it difficult to survive in the village. The Nigerian government in connivance with the expatriates has destroyed their means of livelihood without providing alternatives, thereby making survival in the village very difficult. Just like other girls from the village who move to Warri, Bonny, and Port Harcourt with no craft or idea of means about survival except by selling their body to white people of different colours, age, and size for "our oil money!" (Agary 2006:38). The fact that both Nigerian corrupt federal government officials who enjoy proceeds from oil and the expatriates decide to ignore the local people of Niger Delta, who bear the blunt of oil exploration turns the people desolate and beleaguered. Efforts to make both sides have a change of thought and attitude are responded to with violence. The unfortunate result is that the locals buoy into violence as to "measure for measure"; and the women, who by the virtue of their nature and cultural position, suffer the mess most resort to prostitution as a lucrative venture in a quest for survival. Moral polarity and anomie is hatched. Laye captures the situation thus:

So boys wandered about the village aimlessly, dropping the phrase “Aluta continua” at the slightest provocation. As for the girls, they dropped out to have their babies or, as my mother would say, to “turn ofogorious with the jobless boys in town” (Agary 2006:34).

It is in this state of anomie that Laye is brought unto the surface of the earth and nurtured. She grows in the village and the situation forces her to depart for Port Harcourt, where the psychic effect continues to tell on her.

### **Conclusion**

With the Bildungsroman narrative of Laye, Agary advocates a concerted effort towards reversal of the ugly trends pervading the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and a global concern to reverse the hydra-headed evils that have befallen the earth through what may be termed “political patriarchy” – domination/control of political and economic powers by superior governmental forces against the feminine – weaker nationalities and individuals. In line with eco-critical principle of replacing the culture of domination (masculinity) with one of care (femininity), Agary demands that the prevailing political, cultural and economic domination, jointly meted out to the Niger Delta people by the Nigerian government and their expatriate counterparts be reviewed. Through the formative story of Laye, whose naivety and psychical instability is exploited by her own “brother”, a fellow Ijaw native perceived to be nationalistic – Retired Admiral Kenneth Alaowei Amalayefa – and an expatriate Sergio who represent local and foreign authorities, respectively. In spite of her yearning for affection, for care, for emotional succour to the socio-economic challenges eating her up, these two men who metaphorically signify the image

of men (patriarchy), deceitfully wreaks havoc on her. Just as the political figures of Nigeria and their economic interest expatriates wreak havoc on the Niger Delta environment, so do Sergio and Admiral ambush the giant vision and aspiration of the young Laye. Like earlier stated, Laye becomes the image of Niger Delta. In other words, connotatively and denotatively, Agary demands pulling down of the existing paradigm that hawks and scavenges on human wellness for a new order whereby nature is preserved and healthy relations of both genders is assured.

The attitude of Admiral who sends Laye for abortion after wittingly impregnating her is despicable, exploitative, destructive, and wickedly. It is a deliberate deed which impinges on her dignity; and it is ethically immoral. Laye's aborted (unaccomplished) dream of achieving self-dignity and satisfying her instinctual yearnings and redeeming the hope of her mother is juxtaposed with the ecological destruction experienced by people of Niger Delta. Without undue interference, Niger Delta ecology (land, water, and air) are expected to sustain the people and satisfy their yearnings. Unfortunately, the unhealthy invasion and penetration of their ecology brings forth unwanted obstruction to the expected natural order suffocating every life in the environment. Therefore, Laye's experience with Sergio and Admiral, when equated with the ecological incidents, has no better description than abortion – abortion of natural order. On the one hand, Laye's vision and aspirations are aborted that the anticipated result or yield becomes, not necessarily poisonous but undesired and suffocating. On the other hand, rape of the ecosystem by multinational oil companies yields crude oil, which also, is not necessarily a poisonous substance, but undesired on farm lands, water bodies, and the air because it suffocates every life thereof. A child in the womb (pregnancy), the outcome of the unacceptable practice, is precious

and highly desirable when it comes through the nuptial rites, so also crude oil, when it goes through the appropriate channels of extraction. In both cases, when “raped”, the consequences are dire and so must be avoided.

The culture of exploitation, therefore, must be replaced with one of care, both in inter-human relations and in our relation with nature such as in the exploitation of natural resources. That is necessary to ensure sustenance of the ecosystem so that our earth will never die.

Ideologically, Agary makes a case for people like Laye, who are products of “unholy” union between the natives and expatriates or travellers, often betrayed by their irregular skin colours. In African contexts, they are the coloured; hence they are stigmatised. Like Laye, they are mere victims of social and economic injustice, who are forced into unholy relationships for existential reasons, and not necessarily as function of moral depravity. Laye says:

I had wanted to understand what it was besides money that made beautiful twenty-one-year-old girls look at their short, fat, ugly fifty-eight-year-old white husbands with so much affection. Maybe then I could understand better or with less anger why there were more and more of my kind – “African-profits” “born-troways,” “ashawo-pickins,” “father-unknowns,” – running around slums of Port Harcourt. Maybe I would not hide from the facts of my birth that my yellow skin and curly hair put on display (Agary 2006:171).

These “coloured” people are not social misfits, as they are often regarded in African cultural setting, but mere victims of social ills. They are capable of making great and unimaginable exploits like

every other member of the society, irrespective of background, race, or ethnicity. Agary urges such women to acquire skills and education as passports to their social and economic elevation. And when they did, the colour stigma would be obliterated. It is for this that Sisi advises Laye, “If you do not have your degree, it will be hard for you. You must be up and doing” (Agary 2006:69). Metaphorically, youth violence is not a lasting solution to the ecological problem in Niger Delta or elsewhere in Africa. The real and victorious war should be waged and won intellectually and politically. This Agary demands from the people to change the narrative to a new and sustainable order whereby every human – native or alien, leader and led, men and women, black, white and coloured, will all be treated on the equality of human dignity.

This novel of formation reveals that women are the worst hit by the exhibition of masculine dominance of every form, be that cultural, political, economic, and social. They (women) should, therefore, learn to be cautious in their dealings. They should maximise every given opportunity for their empowerment and not be distracted or carried away by momentary pleasures like does Laye, which earns her monumental regrets.

Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* is a parallel tale, a narrative of two sides of a coin – where one side bears ecological death of Niger Delta and the other, the psychic, social, and economic effect to Laye and her fellow indigenous people. It is a kind of ouroboros phenomenon. The action of man reverberates to man. Agary sues for discontinuation of all forms of exploitation, whether from expatriates because it is not their country folk and indigenous environment that are affected; or from different African leaders whose utmost, and perhaps, sole concern has been their own pecuniary benefits; and even the people’s representatives in the

government anywhere (like Admiral) because the limit of the ripples is uncertain.

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