

**The Journey Motif and Zilayefa's Escape from Ecological Devastation in Kaine
Agary's *Yellow-Yellow***

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Abstract

This paper examines The Journey Motif and Zilayefa's escape from ecological devastation in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. It is primarily premised on William Rueckett's ecocriticism, as well as Alfred Crosby's concept of ecological imperialism. The appraisal is qualitative and adopts materials from research papers in journals, books, and library sources. The novelist, Kaine Agary, has made, successfully, perspective representations of the causes and implications of movement from the hinterland into the urban centre – environmental degradation, violence, corruption in the region. It exposes the environmental condition of the region and its people, the quandary they suffer, and awakens the reader to the need for environmental justice in order to ensure social harmony and peaceful existence.

Keywords: *Yellow-Yellow*, Ecocriticism, Ecological Degradation, Eco-activism.

Introduction

Most literary works reflecting the sensibilities of the Niger Delta have been described as lachrymal and elegiac (Nwahunanya, 2011; Ushie, 2011; and Onukaogu & Onyerionwu, 2011). This implies that most of the themes and subject matter encountered in the literature of the Niger Delta revolve around traumatic events such as military brutality, oil pollution, militancy, corruption, betrayal, dispossession and displacement. Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is one of the earlier novels written by a female writer from the Niger Delta and about the Niger Delta oil and environmental crises. The novel is based on the devastation of the human and nonhuman elements in the oil-producing communities of Nigeria's Niger Delta. The novel portrays the connection between environmental degradation and the

plights of the African woman. However, in *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary announces her ability to rise above other eco-activists and eco-writers who chronicle or narrate the Niger Delta's woes without envisioning hope, especially for the woman. Agary does this, especially through the use of the journey motif to demonstrate Zilayefa's movement from hopelessness to hope and from pessimism to optimism.

The Journey Motif is as ancient as literature itself. According to Reilly (2000), the journey motif is commonly used in many literary traditions and genres; hence, it has become "a shared legacy, accessible and used by European American authors along with African American Authors" (p. 724). Apart from European and American writers, African writers also employ this motif in their works. For instance, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm wine Drunkard*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Americah*, amongst others, bear instances of their major characters embarking on life-transforming journeys that have a great impact on the plot of the novels. Essentially, Agary uses the journey motif to accentuate Zilayefa's longing to resolve a sense of loss, exploitation, emptiness, and her desire for self-discovery and self-fulfilment. Her journey from her "claustrophobic" village that is bedeviled with oil pollution is interpreted as a literary strategy for her movement from innocence to knowledge and from trials to triumph. Her journey away from her root is also an indictment against the government of Nigeria that has failed to protect its people from exploitation and displacement. The use of the term, "blood" to symbolize the oil stolen from Zilayefa's community is as subversive as it is retributive. It is subversive in the sense that it is an anomaly. Oil stolen from the region is not used to develop the place. Rather, in the subversive manner of the act, it leaves with it trials of woe in forms of spillages and destruction of the land and aquatic life. Not only do the people feel cheated, but there are evidence of calculated attempt at destroying the physical environment that in turn is met by counter-insurrection by the people of the Niger-Delta. Although the above may appear socio-political, one is tempted to still consider it as forming part of an analysis of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. To authenticate the concept of subversion in the story and locate it within a time as well as political setting, from a jurisprudential and military perspective, the term "subversion" is viewed as actions that are aimed at weakening or destroying a prevailing power or authority. In the Niger Delta settings, issues of subversion go beyond politics and military might to morality and justice. Analyzing the subversive role that oil plays in the region and beyond, Judith Burdin Asuni is of the view that "blood oil owes its origin to ... conflicts. The sale of stolen oil from the Niger Delta has had the same pernicious influence on that region's conflict as diamonds did in the wars in Angola and Sierra Leone" (2009, p.2). The point of emphasis here is that, subversion, either in the non-fictional or the fictional Niger Delta setting of the novels, is as much an issue worthy of attention as any other, in any part of the world.

Agary, actually makes use of historical figures and events as she reflects in the novel:

It was the year after the government hanged Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with nine other Ogonis, for inciting an insurrection ... every young boy had visions of dying valiantly for the cause ... so boys wandered about the village aimlessly dropping the phrase "Aluta Continua" at the slightest provocation (p. 34).

The historical figures and incidents mentioned in *Yellow-Yellow* paint a clear picture of politically tensed environmental and other revolutions that are synonymous to subversion which are quite indicative of a state of insecurity. Reactions by characters in the novel to the challenges that confront them include violent acts that in turn violate the very essence of being of other creatures, so that it becomes a vicious circle of overturning of the culture of peaceful co-existence of entities in the ecosystem.

On the subject of subversion in the novels, this concept does not occur in a vacuum or without cause, pointing avoidable developments such as repression of a group or entity by another as the usual precursor to violent actions. The culture of subversion is embedded in the life of the larger nation within which the Niger Delta setting is located. As such, that area becomes a microcosm of the larger Niger nation, which is said to possess a tradition that is couched in hegemony, capitalism, and exclusion. The struggle for the survival of humans themselves is the force behind their agitation or ecological activism/consciousness. This also shows that ecoactivism is a consequence of the consciousness on the part of the people that exploitation of naturally occurring resources brings about degradation of their environment.

Finally, on the question of the relationship between the novel under study, and its setting, the novel has definite relationships with the environment in its numerous degrees of treatment of Niger Delta issues such as: subversion of the environment in forms of privation, hardships faced by the people, the issue of degradation of the environment, the issue of eco-terrorism, the issue of destruction of creatures other than humans, issue of corruption, moral degeneration, injustice and unfair distribution of proceeds from the common wealth, issue of retribution and relationship with the environment, and so on.

Zilayefa's Journey Motif and the Niger Delta Quandary

Zilayefa's journey motif is an important theme in the novel. Through this motif, we discover Zilayefa's search for identity and self-discovery. This proposal by Zilayefa is clearly stated when she explains why she attempted to escape the realities of her rural

environment, thus: “I read because the books took me to other worlds and make me forget my own reality. I knew every square inch of my village, and I felt like a trapped animal” (p. 31). She further narrates, after weighing the socio-political predicaments of the youths and people of her community in the hands of the oil-company polluters, that: “considering all these, I decided that an out-of-towner would be my ticket out of my desperate existence, until Sergio’s unceremonious exit forced me into a dungeon of tortured soul-searching” (p. 34);

I was open to all sorts of things. The only option I was unwilling to consider, that tormented my quiet moments the most, was to remain in my village. My ears still rang from material 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 whose unsteady feet betrayed them before they had learnt to swim. How many more times could I bear the pain like a hundred razor blades slashing my private part because the river water that washed it was the same water that received the waste rejected by my body in its attempt to cleanse itself? The water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of escaped from the pipelines that moved the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank. (p. 39)

In the end, we see that Agary’s use of the journey motif provides insight into how Zilayefa attempts to escape her stifling and polluted environment to cater for her social needs. Owhorodu (2019) states that more often than not, push-and-pull factors (economic, social, political and physical factors that either forcefully push people into migration or attract them to another area of better opportunities) are responsible for characters’ journey. The critic identifies lack of jobs, few opportunities, political fear or persecution, poor medical care, slavery, pollution, and discrimination as some push factors, and job opportunities, better living conditions, education, security, family links, political and religious freedom, as pull factors.

To escape the traumatic effects of oil pollution, militancy, and socio-economic marginalization, Zilayefa travels to Port Harcourt where she is taken in by Sisi and Lolo. Both women are caring and supportive of her. We see the positive impact of Zilayefa’s connection with Lolo as the former says: “I saw a future image of me in the likeness of Lolo, and that pleased me. Thus, I jumped into her shadow, accepting the possibility that this figure, who has instantly intrigued me, would envelop my own personality” (p. 52).

Zilayefa is not the only woman who surmounts the limitations imposed by a patriarchal world and a degraded environment. Sisi is a successful businesswoman, with investment in real estate, despite her Standard Six Education. Through her exposure and brother's influence, she gets contracts for food supply and toilet paper. Moreover, she owns a boutique where she employs young female workers. Similarly, Lolo is a contractor and an enterprising young lady. Sisi and Lolo eventually help Zilayefa secure a job at the Royal Hotel as a receptionist.

The question at this point is: what are those factors behind Zilayefa's ultimate decision to escape to Port Harcourt? She is afraid that whatever ruined her mother's economic life could as well ruin hers. There is no hope or future for the people of her community whose means of livelihood are degraded by the oil companies. It is a case of destroyed ecology. Hence, it is imperative to note that one of the consequences of ecological imperialism in Zilayefa's story is the migration of young girls from the villages to the cities for the purpose of prostitution. The young boys stay back or equally migrate to town to engage in kidnap cases. The narrator, Zilayefa, puts it as follows: "The school year had started out with twelve girls and thirty boys in my class, but some of the boys dropped out to take on responsibility for their families. Others dropped out to join the growing army who claimed they were fighting for justice for the Niger Delta" (p.34). Zilayefa's mother, Bibi does not want her child to make the same mistakes she made herself in her youthful days in which she got impregnated by Zilayefa's Greek father. So, she does her best to give Zilayefa a good education. When Bibi reaches the zenith of her efforts, Zilayefa concludes that there is no future for her in her community, rather she plans to seek for greener pastures in the city of Port Harcourt. She is persuaded by the reality that most of the girls in the village migrate from the village to Port Harcourt and Bonny where they would connect with expatriates. They do everything possible to capture the whites or "whiteys", as they are popularly called; including using diabolical means.

After a while, these antisocial acts seem not to promote the needed peace and order in the community. The indigenes then resolve to seek help from their leaders who begin to get aids in the form of stipends and compensations from the oil firms. But after a while, the oil companies stop paying compensation because, according to them the youths of the community are the ones who deliberately destroy the pipes. Hence, the villagers are subjected to untold hardship and destitution. The situation is totally hopeless, as the farmlands are polluted by oil spillage. There is no electricity. What more, because people can no longer cultivate their foods, they purchase their food from the cities, which has now become the hope of the growing youths in Zilayefa's community. Consequently, the inhabitants of these areas are forced to migrate to avoid their dreams and hopes being

shattered. According to Zilayefa, with reference to her mother: "I did not care as much as she did about finishing my school; I just wanted to leave the village. The sameness of life in the village would kill me if I did not escape" (p. 10). She considers the village as a claustrophobic space. According to her, she chose to leave the village because she feels that her destiny does not lie in "my claustrophobic village" (p. 17).

Finally, she gets to Port Harcourt as the author shows that the female suffers doubly: from ecological imperialism and patriarchal hegemony into the arms of Admiral Kenneth Alaowei in Port Harcourt. Out of her teenage curiosity, she also sleeps with Sergio, an expatriate. By her pregnancy, she seems to have thwarted her dream and her mother's dreams for her. Her travel to the city turns out to be an adventure towards self-identity and self-discovery. This journey takes her through uncharted, grey areas and brings her into a head-on collision with several instances and situations that proves that she is poorly prepared to face life on her own. She makes several mistakes that culminate in her being pregnant and an abortion that almost ends her life. In all, she comes out of the predicament humbled, with a fresh resolve to begin afresh by threading more carefully.

Through Agary's presentation, one tends to get a better picture of how the Niger Delta region has lived through tortuous infrastructural neglect by the federal government and multinational corporations. It has witnessed unquantifiable damage on its agrarian and other natural resources, with no intention or programme geared towards remediation. More worrisome is that successive governments, even with their democratic cloak have flagrantly dashed the hopes of the indigenous people. This tragic historical situation in the region has produced an enduring literature. One could then say that this is the core concern expressed in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*.

Through the novel, therefore, Agary has identified the problem of lack of empathy, and exploitation of the key points to the social contradictions manifesting in the region. Taken together, we can say that Agary's narrative frames the conjoined and its women. The female characters can, therefore, be considered as the metaphoric environment, for they represent the denigration, commodification and exploitation which the natural environment of the Niger Delta undergoes. We have read Agary's work using the journey motif to foreground not only how she joins forces with environmentalists and activists to condemn acts that undermine the preservation of the human and non-human aspects of the environment, but also how she envisions hope and optimism for women.

In the context of understudying the novel, one of the aspects of the study presents betrayal as an important issue in the crises of the region. According to Nnamdi, et al (2013) betrayal

is the “establishment of ecological stewardship in the Niger Delta by oil-prospecting bureaucracies and the government of Nigeria” (p. 67). In the novel, this phenomenon manifests at different levels: betrayal by the government, betrayal by the multinational corporations and betrayal by greedy community heads/chiefs. In assessing the problem as a major undoing of the region, one cannot but identify the indifference of the government to the environmentally-devastating practices of many multinational corporations operating in the region. From gas flare to oil spill, and to other ecologically-destructive practices. The successive Nigerian governments have been criticized to be unfair, unjust and dishonest to the cause of the people. As Ojaide (2007) puts it, the government has chosen rather “to throw enough green over desert dust” (p. 35). the multinational oil corporations have equally failed to fulfill their own part of the agreement reached with many of the region’s communities at their point of entry. It is alleged that some of these multinationals had earlier agreed to certain terms and conditions with their host communities and later disillusioned the people. Such practice has prompted Maduka to describe the region as, “the predator’s paradise” (p. 79, 2013).

More so, the leaders of the people have been criticized for their betraying role in the affairs of the region. Some of these self-seeking leaders have, through their unbridled greed and unapologetic betrayal, denied the region its development. This is what one finds in the following passage:

Young boys threatened to rough up the Amananaowei and his elders because rumours, probably true had reached their ears that the Amananaowei and his elders had received monetary compensation meant for the village, from the oil company and shared it among themselves. These images darkened the canvas of my village life (p. 40).

It implies that with these betrayals, the growth of the region becomes stagnant, in other words, the development will remain a tall order. Thus, the people’s hope have been dashed by the realities of the present. It then implies that the woes of the region, especially, the betrayal by the multinational oil industries is a manifestation of neo-colonialism, hence Gomba (2013) states that, “The irony is that the wheels of the western economies and the system of postcolonial Nigeria are oiled by the resources of the marginalized region’ (p. 234).

That *Yellow-Yellow* actually begins with an oil spillage incident that Bibi and other inhabitants of the community, symbolically means that oil spillage is at the heart of any informed discourse on environmental pollution in the Niger Delta. With the discovery of

crude oil, the region continues to bubble with economic activities that are capable of bedrocking it with precious infrastructure. However, instead of causing the region's economy to boom, it has brought it to the place of doom, as described by Nwahunanya (2011). This environmental damage directly affects fishing and farming, the main occupation of the locals. The rivers and streams have been polluted by gas flares and oil spills. According to Ihayere, Ogeleka, and Ataine (2014), tons of carbon dioxide and methane are emitted annually into the atmosphere in the region. We should not forget that in the story, Bibi's farmland is overrun by crude oil. While the oil company that owns the pipeline blames the spillage on sabotage by the community youths, insisting that they would not pay any compensation, the victims of the spill continue to count their agrarian and aquatic losses, such as Bibi. Moreover, another major problem in the region's oil discourse is the lack of environmental justice. The narrator laments that: "The water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of escaped from the pipelines that moved the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank. (p.39). This is an example of the hazards which the people are exposed to. The people's health conditions deteriorate by each passing day.

In terms of the plight of the woman in a typical oil-producing community, Bibi and Zilayefa symbolize the effects of ecological imperialism on the Niger Delta region. The latter represents the negative by-products of oil exploration and environmental degradation. She is called "*Yellow-Yellow*" because of her complexion. She is the product of an Ijaw mother and a Greek sailor who abandons her mother, Bibi, shortly after she becomes pregnant. Children like Zilayefa are labelled *born-throwaways* (children rejected by their fathers or whose fathers are non-existent). Such "fathers" are expatriates/oil merchants from Europe, Britain, Portugal, Syria, and America. These expatriates come to the region to carry out business deals that are, though, tilted towards exploitation. But at the end of their contracts, they abandon the victims of their illicit love affairs and its products (their children) and flee the country. They leave behind them women and children who are to bear the pressure of navigating through such trauma as single mothers and fatherless children, respectively.

Through Bibi, Agary shows the difficulties faced by a single mother as she attempts to successfully raise Zilayefa amid an environment that is bedeviled by all manner of denigration and exploitation. Due to oil spillage, Bibi struggles with fulfilling the dream she conceives for Zilayefa. Through the eyes of Zilayefa, we see the effect of the spillage, thus: "one of the pipes that ran through my village broke and spilled oil over several hectares of land, my mother's included" (p.3). According to Zilayefa, because of the destruction of their farmland, "by the time I finish school, my mother did not have enough

money for the university. I could not even take the qualifying examinations because she did not have the registration fee" (pp.10-11). This is the light of many young school-leavers in the region. In fact, for children who are still in school, the situation is more traumatizing:

Students are grossly cheated even as their region generates the greatest source of revenue for the nation. In school, children do not have all the textbooks, because most of them could not afford all the textbooks. Schools could barely pay teachers and could not provide books for the students (p.9)

The youths in Zilayefa's community resort to antisocial acts against the oil communities in order to reclaim their stolen wealth and peace:

Some boys from the village joined others from other villages to kidnap oil company workers from doing their work. Mostly they were successful, but sometimes one or two of the boys failed to return from a mission. The word around the village was that the police had caught and killed them, but we would not hear about this on the radio (p. 10).

Violence and militancy are major outcomes of the situation in the region. According to Nwankwo (2015), the conflict in the Niger Delta is triggered by, but not limited to, "the revenue allocation formula and resource control, federalism, environmental degradation, state-imposed poverty, unfulfilled promises made by the government" (p.384). Francis, Lapin, and Rossiasco (2011) identify three levels of factors responsible for the unrest in the region. First, they believe that "structural factors" (the underlying conditions and the basic ways in which society, the government, and the political economy work) make the region particularly vulnerable to instability. Second, they identify what they call "driving factors" to constitute the grievances that emerge from the structural factors and constitute the perceptions, inadequacies, and tensions that suffuse the daily lives of people and predispose them to conflict. Third, they believe that "provoking factors" are those that exacerbate latent conflict by sparking violence and crime, often for profit. According to Ihayere, Ogeleka, and Ataine (2014), the Niger Delta experiences an increasing rate of organized criminality among the youths. Therefore, in the expression of their anger and bitterness, young men often kidnap oil workers and relatives of oil merchants. Moreover, pipeline vandalism is rife in the region. These are demonstrated in the novel, as earlier mentioned; some boys from Zilayefa's village taking up arms against the government and the oil company workers as a way of directing the attention of the government to their predicaments. Although some of them are successful in organizing kidnappings, others

are killed by the police. Many of these boys are school dropouts who decide to join the growing number of militant groups agitating for social and environmental justice for the region. The girls from Zilayefa's village resort to prostitution and are exposed to numerous life-threatening circumstances, including sadomasochism and the brutality of pimps, just to make ends meet. It is ironic in this case that we are confronted with a high rate of unemployment in a region that accommodates major oil companies in the world. Ihayere, Ogeleka, and Ataine (2014) observe that workers for these oil companies are mainly recruited from outside the region and overseas, while the natives are treated as second-class citizens, faced with no hope of getting a job, and left to battle with abject poverty.

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