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The Niger Delta Region and the Woman's Predicament: A Study of Kaine Agary's *Yellow- Yellow* (Pp. 155-166)

Simon, E. D. - Centre For General Studies, Cross River University Of
Technology, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, Africa

E-mail: mssimon64@yahoo.com

Phone: 08037208487

Abstract

*Recently, Kaine Agary has joined the new crop of African writers like Promise Okeke, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Ata, Chris Abani, Helon Habila, Okey Ndibe etc. She made her entry into the literary circle through the publication of *Yellow-Yellow*, a novel which depicts the debilitating conditions of women and the Niger Delta environment. The region is bedeviled with ecological problems as well as other social ills. Agary exposes the moral laxity caused by poverty, joblessness and lack of social amenities like schools, roads, etc. in the region. Through the machination of patriarchy and culture, Agary exposes women in the region as victims of circumstances beyond their making and further expounds the racial prejudice in the region. The women in Agary's fiction are treated with suspicion and exploited by local and foreign men. This paper seeks to explore the female predicament in Agary's fiction and the dichotomy of rural and urban existence in the Niger Delta region. The paper also exposes, how the dividend of oil exploration eludes the people who should be beneficiaries of the oil largess.*

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is rich in crude oil otherwise known as black gold. This singular factor has made this region a cause celebre and a

hotbed of trouble in the Sub-Saharan region. The region is bedeviled with ecological problems. The discovery of oil in the region has affected agriculture, fishing as well the living conditions of the people. Wumi Raji contends that “when Shell D’Arcy, the Anglo-Dutch Petroleum Corporation which later transformed to Shell Petroleum Development Company shipped out the first 5,000 barrels in 1958, the price of the mineral resources was only \$4.00 US dollars per barrel. By 1981, when almost 15 oil companies jointly produced over 2 million barrels daily from the innumerable oil wells strewn all over the Niger Delta, the price per barrel had risen to 40 dollar ...” (58).

Land in the Niger Delta, like in other parts of Nigeria and Africa is regarded as a sacred entity as well as symbol of life and status. This is probably why Ngugi posits that “the basic objective of the Mau Mau revolutionaries was to drive out the Europeans ... and give back to the Kenyan peasants their stolen land” (28). In South Africa, due to the temperate climate and natural endowment, the Europeans penetrated into the interior, driving out the natives into infertile land and exploring their mineral for their personal development at the detriment of black South Africans. The black South Africans became labourers in the mines. They were moved into shacks and condemned to a slow genocide. Like in East Africa (Kenya) this form of oppression and deprivation led to resistance. This recurring decimal perpetuates itself in the Niger Delta environment, resulting in hardship for the people. Land, streams, creeks etc have been polluted, roofs of buildings in the area have been perforated while “the vapour when it settles on the skin turns into a charred surface in the form of an unsightly skin disease” (Raji, III). Raji reasons further that “there is also the effect of consistent explosions which cause many of the buildings to shake and the wall to crack. Because of this many of the villagers have had to abandon their houses, migrating to other villages in search of refuge” (III).

Apart from these ecological problems, the Niger Delta region lacks basic social amenities like portable drinking water, electricity, roads, hospitals, schools, job opportunities to enable the people earn their living and become self reliant, yet the region is the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg that feeds the entire nation. It is against this backdrop of economic, social and political deprivation that Ken Saro Wiwa and eight of his kinsmen have died for. Saro Wiwa views the exploration of oil by multinationals as anti-people exploitation. In an insightful interview, Saro Wiwa affirms that his people live in the middle of death. What Saro Wiwa advocates for is the right of the Ogoni people to use their resources for their own development.

Sam Uniamikogbo and Stanley Aibieyi rightly submit that “considering the role of oil in National development, the struggle for indigenous control of activities in the industry has persisted over the years. Among oil exploring countries like Mexico and Libya, this struggle has culminated in apparent revolution, which ultimately forced out foreign oil firms from the industry and made way for national control of oil operations” (247).

Saro Wiwa's fight for social justice and minority rights has made him a man of the people. That he was able to mobilise and draw attention, locally and internationally to the plight of his people marked him out as one of the greatest activist of our time. Kaine Agary's novel, *Yellow-Yellow* situates itself within the Niger Delta discourse as well as the polemics surrounding the women in this region. Agary's inspiration as a writer derives from Saro Wiwa's commitment for social justice for the Ogoni people, who have been marginalised, deprived and exploited. Pushed to the wall, these people have no choice but to bounce back in order to force the government and indeed humanity to understand their predicament. This has led to untold violence: killing, maiming, gunrunning, destruction/vandalization of pipelines and recently kidnapping of foreigners and Nigerians for ransom. Young girls/women who cannot find jobs to do or education, find succour in the hands of foreigners who exploit their sexuality. The plight of women in the Niger Delta region is indeed pathetic. Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is a literary enterprise whose main thrust is to expose further the socio-economic predicament of the people as well as explore the debilitating effect of poverty on the feminine psyche.

The need to resolve conflict in the Niger Delta has been worrisome. Granting amnesty after surrendering arms to restive youths in return for training and skill acquisition, some have argued is still not the best option. Recently President Yar'Adua has placed the repentant militants on a salary, but for how long? Miscreants have joined the throng as ex-militants in order to reap where they did not sow. No one is sure who the real militants are and if they have surrendered all their arms. The situation is dicy and need careful attention to forestal uprising in the region. The said Ministry of the Niger Delta has to be more proactive and sensitive to the needs and yearnings of the people. If the crisis in the Niger Delta region is well managed, then the conflicts in the region would have been solved and peace will certainly return to the region.

The Woman's Predicament in *Yellow-Yellow*

Kaine Agary is one of Nigeria's latest female writers. She made her debut with the publication of *Yellow-Yellow* (2006). In so doing, she has joined the class of new millennium writers like Chimamanda Adichie, Helon Habila, etc who are doggedly committed to keeping alive the art of canonical colossi like Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi etc. Agary is inspired by the need to write a feminist story from a woman's point of view. Helen Chukwume acknowledges that female writing in Africa can be traced to the mid-sixties with the first generation of writers: Flora Nwapa, Delphinia King, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo; Grace Ogot, Miriam Tlali, Zulu Sofola and Bessie Head" (102). It is healthy to note that these literary foremothers, dead or alive will be happy to know that their early "timid and tortuous" efforts to borrow Chukwuma's (2000:120) expression have not been in vain, that somehow, somewhere, other women are perpetuating their art.

The woman's predicament has always been the concern of female writers in Africa and in the diaspora. This is so because women and children constitute the most oppressed group in the society. The woman's predicament is worsened by patriarchal structures which further underpins the female's growth and development. Women therefore have to contend with different forms of oppression ranging from sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, prostitution, rape etc. As the "weaker vessels" or "weakened vessels" to borrow Akachi Ezeigbo's expression in *Children of the Eagle*, they are often trampled upon and at other times rendered voiceless by the machination of patriarchy and culture in order to keep them in check.

Yellow-Yellow doubles as the book's title and the protagonist's name given to her by villagers because of her complexion. It is the story of an illicit relationship between an eighteen year old Ijaw girl, (Ina Binaebi) and a Greek sailor. The result is an early pregnancy and Binaebi's ambition of getting a good job is truncated. This is the plight of many young school leavers in the Niger Delta region and this also accounts for the ever growing number of half caste children in the oil rich region today. The children are fathered by Europeans, British, Portuguese, Syrians, Lebanese, Filipinos, Chinese and Americans who come to do business in the region. Agary documents:

I found out there were generations of yellows in the Niger Delta area, and each one had a different story. There were the yellows from the 1800s, the days of the Royal Niger

Company, later known as the United Africa Company (UAC), which the British had set up to maximize their gain from the palm oil trade. There were also the yellow from Portuguese traders who remained in the region until the British took full control and pursued them out... the next generation were those from the Syrian and Lebanese and Greek businessmen and sailors, some of whom had married Nigerian women. These yellows knew their fathers... (*Yellow-Yellow* 74).

From the foregoing, it is clear that *Yellow-Yellow* also expounds the story of racial prejudice in the Niger Delta region. These biracial children are given different name tags like "mammy water", "born-troway", "African profit", "ashawo pikin", "father unknown", etc. They are stigmatized as HIV/AIDS patients. Barbara Christian submits that "the fruit of miscegenation is Tragedy, regardless of what other positive characteristics the mulatta might possess" (16).

Perhaps, more pertinent is the ecological problems of the region which Agary brings to the fore. Agary documents the aftermath of oil spillage in the environment:

A group of people, painted in the same black as my mother, some covered from head to toe, were marching to see the Amananowei, the head of the village. I joined them to find out what had happened. It turned out some had lost their farmland that day...some were crying; others were talking about compensation (*Yellow-Yellow*, p 4).

The spillage destroys farm lands as well as the aquatic life of the people, thereby causing villagers to lose their source of livelihood. There is also the strong smell from crude: "I can't describe it but it was strong, so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach" (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.4). Zilayefa (Yellow) recalls that "however, I think she had lost that land a long time ago, because each season yielded less than the season before. Not unlike the way she and others in the village had gradually lost, year after year, the creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares, and who knows what else..." (*Yellow-Yellow* 4).

To further compound the plight of the people, the oil company refuse to pay compensation for all the damages done, declaring a suspect sabotage among the youths. The oil spillage has untold hardship on women, who are

traditionally farmers. Women now travel into the interior to farm and this takes a toll on their wellbeing. Youths become restive and violence erupts. Some boys join others from neighbouring villages to “kidnap oil company executives or bar oil company workers from doing their work” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.9-10). Ato Quayson reasons that “violence becomes a means by which to visit popular displeasure on those associated with the state, particularly minor officials and those seen as colluding with it” (58). Corroborating Quayson, Ngugi affirms that “violence in order to change an intolerance unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man...” (28). The Niger Delta region is subjected to structural violence which Oke Ibeanu limns as being expressed “in such conditions as exclusion, deprivation and poverty” (10).

Yellow’s mother is saddled with the responsibility of raising her biracial daughter after her abandonment. Her concern for her daughter’s well being leads her to living a life of self denial. Agary writes thus: “she would make sure that I accomplished what she had not. She had inherited a small piece of land from her family, which she farmed and sometimes she would go fishing... she took care of my needs and sometimes went without...she expelled herself from the woman’s group so that she would not be forced to spend money on wrappers for their outings” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.8). This care and attention calls to mind the women’s role in Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, where the women, according to Teresa Njoku “sell everything of value to support their families. This is an economic enhancement of family being” (129).

Binaebi acknowledges the importance of education, hence her insistence on Yellow’s education. She therefore subscribes to Nkechi Okoli’s claim (2008), cited in Oduaram and Bhola (2006:431-32) that “the education of the female liberate them from the shackles of abuse, oppression, poverty, exclusion, harmful cultural practices and culturally based limitations on their rights. Education elevates the female to the state of partners in progress with men instead of continuing as a “liability”. This assertion tallies with Chioma Opara’s view that “simply put female education is projected as the fillip to economic empowerment, which is starkly contrasted with poverty and deprivation” (98).

Again, Agary presents rural women in the Niger Delta region as hard working. Their sagacity is under-scored by their drive to forge ahead despite

their debilitating environment. This author hints on old times when men gave dugout canoes to their wives for fishing, thus empowering them to help feed the family. The art of canoe-carving emphasizes the traditional occupation of the Ijaw people which has been eroded by oil wealth and corruption. Today, the men dominate the women, “the men claimed that, according to tradition it was their exclusive right to make all the decisions inside and outside the home. Most times because they did not succeed in the home, they drew the line at women participating in communal meetings on serious town issues” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.40). Bates et al are of the opinion that “the distinction between the “public” sphere of politics and the “private” sphere of domestic life obscures the inescapable fact that excluding women from the public sphere deprives us of control over our presumably private existence” (536). Ogbujah and Davies in their submission aver that “hardly are the opinions of women sought in decision making or even in projects that would have direct bearing with their lives. Yet they are required to fully comply with the norms and the often difficult demands of tasks in their families” (24).

Women in Agary's fiction have been battered for daring “to question their husband's wisdom in spending the last kobo in the house on booze” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.40). Others with uterine fibroids were branded witches by diviners and ostracized. Like Saro Wiwa, Agary portrays her people as ‘illiterate, gullible and rural, exploited because of conservative dogmatism and adherence to superstition’ (Ogunjimi, 85). In a review titled “Beyond Nigerian Nightmare” on *Yellow-Yellow*, Precious Ona argues that “to Agary, the suffering is in two forms: the women suffer in the hands of the foreign oil expatriate and in the hands of local men who discriminate, subjugate and relegate them to the background” (35). For the young girls in Agary's fiction, the only escape is through prostitution. These girls sell their bodies to foreign oil workers – “the highest bidder” and some procure love portion which they use on these men. The hazards of prostitution are numerous. Apart from sexually transmitted diseases, the men abuse women physically or “pushed objects like bottles into their privates as part of their fun” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.37). In addition, the local boys attack the shacks where the girls live, beat, steal and destroy their property. Some of these boys act as pimps. Agary shows the misuse of petronaira in the Niger Delta region. The girls lament “and na our money O! Na our oil money” (p.38). Money that should have been used to develop the region is squandered on frivolities.

Agary's depiction of moral ineptitude occasioned by joblessness and poverty in the region is unique. I subscribe to Chioma Opara's claim that “the pain of

poverty has been born by women in patriarchal and capitalist societies all over the world” (117). Again, Okoli affirms that “poverty in Africa (in Nigeria in particular) has been described as legendary. With insecurity looming in most countries of the world, the resultant effect is threats from regional and ethnic conflicts, growing economic inequity, rising levels of corruption, the expanding HIV/AIDS epidemic, severe pressure on political and social institutions and poverty increase” (57-58).

Zilayefa’s relocation to Port Harcourt expose her to urban life. She is taken in by Sisi, a mixed race woman, who is caring and supportive. Alongside Lolo, they care for Zilayefa as one of their own. In Lolo, Zilayefa claims “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 had instantly intrigued me, would envelop my own personality” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.52). Sisi, despite her standard six education is a successful business woman. Through her exposure and brother’s influence, she gets contracts and food supply. She also supplies toilet paper and leased pick-up trucks. In addition, she runs a boutique. Being resourceful, Sisi invests in real estate. She employs young girls to work for her, thereby empowering them.

In the same vein, Lolo, Sisi’s “little friend” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.52), is the grand daughter of one of the famous Leslie Cole brothers, emigrants from Sierra Leone. Being the only girl in the family, she remains home to help manage her parent’s investments. She is a contractor and an enterprising young lady. The bond between Sisi and Lolo is reminiscent of that between Efuru and Ajanupu in Nwapa’s *Efuru*. Female bonding helps women nurture and support one another economically. This is what Sisi and Lolo demonstrate. The duo help Zilayefa secure a job at the Royal Hotel as a receptionist. They encourage her to safe so as to continue her education.

In an ironic twist, Zilayefa allows herself to be infatuated by Admiral, a sixty year old man. In her naivety, she recalls that “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 close paternal affection that I had never had” (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.138). Admiral is the devourer who capitalizes on a helpless girl’s innocence. Ogbujah and Davies opine that “while male sexual vices are often overlooked, female infidelity is treated with utmost contempt and hostility, resulting in the woman being publicly disgraced” (24). Ona on her part argues that:

oil wealth encourages men in the region to take advantage of their perceived economic buoyancy by engaging in sexual intercourse with many girls often without protection...The Delta's oil economy has generated several moral contradictions by creating a class of rich who flaunt their wealth and gain access to an extensive network of female sexual partners. Agary portrays more on this point using the character of Admiral who fell in love with Zilayefa and impregnates her...Agary believes strongly that the environmental predicament contributes to social and economic deprivation, further complicating the development situation of women in the region (35).

What Zilayefa suffers is similar to her mother's fate despite the latter's admonitions. Old men like Admiral, Zilayefa's kinsman, who should protect her from all forms of abuses, turn around to exploit her sexuality. This paradigm expose the socio-economic ills in not only the region but the society at large. Agary, through this exposure, touches on salient feminist issues. Sisi and Lolo are role models that the protagonist should have emulated. Sisi and Lolo stand tall in a society which views women with suspicion and treat them as underdogs. Both women are independent and self-reliant. Sisi and Lolo subscribe to Mary Kolawole's view that "many African women recognise the way patriarchy has been manipulated to put them down and they are struggling against these forms of subjugation and intimidation wherever they exist..." (13).

By venturing out of the domestic sphere (the home) into the business arena, Lolo, Inema (her mother) and Sisi demonstrate that the place of women in contemporary times have changed. Agary is of the opinion that women can surmount patriarchal and cultural boundaries in order to assert their selfhood. Agary is therefore a committed writer who is poised to change the lot of women. Binaebi's ability to pick her life after her pregnancy and abandonment is commendable. Agary's rural women are hardworking, they are the biblical hewers of wood and drawers of water, "the mules of the earth" to borrow Zora Neale Hurston's expression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It is against this backdrop that the concept of social collectivism becomes relevant. Iniobong Uko cites Mazrui (1978:68) as viewing social collection as "that complex of loyalties which tied the individual to his own specific society, which commanded his affection for his kith and kin, which aroused his protectiveness for the soil of his ancestors,

which enables him to serve, and ... to love his people” (73). This is true of Saro Wiwa, Sisi and Lolo. This concept is however negated in Admiral, who is a spoiler, morally and ethically bankrupt since he fails in his duty as an elder statesman of his tribe.

In foregrounding Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, her humanist ideology come to the fore. Julie Agbasiere opines that “socio-politically committed writers create great works of art is consequent on the ability of the writer to rise above the socio-political data and explore the inner man in all his rawness. Thus he explores the human condition. Such a writer is a humanist and it is this element of humanism that raises the worth of committed works” (76). As Izevbaye puts it “as a humanist, a novelist can hardly deal with politics, society or civilization without relating it to its effects on the human personality” (76). Agary's portraiture of the woman's predicament in the Niger Delta underscores Omolara Ogundipe Leslie's claim that “female writers in Africa must show commitment by correcting the false images of women in Africa and telling about being a woman and describing reality from a woman's point of view or perspective” (63).

Conclusion

The exploration of oil in the Niger Delta has grave ecological, socio-political, economic and health implications for the populace and especially women in Agary's fiction. Agary's fiction expounds the complex situation women are trapped in. The region calls for urgent attention. In order to stem the tide of rural urban migration, there is need to create an enabling environment for the Niger Deltans to live in. These include electricity, pipe borne water, schools, colleges, tertiary institutions, skill acquisition centres, hospitals, roads, job opportunities etc. The women can be further empowered through proper education on health matters, improved farming and fishing methods etc so that they can be self-employed and self-reliant. The said Ministry of the Niger Delta should be more proactive and check youth restiveness, kidnapping and vandalization of pipelines in the region. The wealth of the region can be harnessed and used in developing the region. With the amnesty deal, it is anticipated that lasting peace will return to the region especially as President Umaru Yar'Adua has approved a whopping sum of one billion naira for the development of the region. The Niger Deltans must be full participants in the development of their region, since they wear the shoe and known where it pinches.

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