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## The Niger Delta Crises in the Niger Delta Novel: Reflections on Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

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### ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is a bridge-building theory; one which connects the physical environment with literature. It is the ideological point of convergence between literature and the environment, an embodiment of the interdisciplinary nature of literature, and the anchor on which the Niger Delta literary discourse is hinged. The Niger Delta region is one region that is richly endowed with both natural and human resources. But some of the questions which many literary scholars in and outside the region have been asking are: to what extent has these deposits influenced the socio-economic developments in this part of the country? Why are some of the persistent crises in the region? Thus, the study undertakes an assessment of the forms of crises occasioned by oil exploration activities in the region with focus on Kaine Agary's fictional work, *Yellow-Yellow*; working within the context of postcolonial theory and the African ecocritical approach, an attempt has been made at offering measures which if adopted, would address these issues limiting the region.

**Keywords:** Crisis, Devastation, Environment, Niger Delta, Oil-Politics.

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### 1. Introduction: Ecocriticism/the Niger delta region of Nigeria

One of preoccupations of Niger Delta literature has been on the implication of environmental crisis on the human agencies. Issues on resources control, unemployment, infrastructural decay, youth restiveness/militancy dominate the Niger Delta discourse, however, this study identifies these crises: the crisis of environmental despoliation, the crisis of youth restiveness, the crisis of betrayal and the crisis of infrastructural neglect, how they constitute into limiting forces to the developmental goals of the region. The study, by appropriating literature in explicating these crises, amplifies the value and relevance of literature to social and environmental issues.

The term, 'ecocriticism' has been traced to William Rueckert, who, in a 1978 essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", wrote that, "ecocriticism entails an application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Barry 249). Put simply, it is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Cheryl Glotfelty insisted on the acceptance of ecocriticism as a respected member of the family of literary studies at 1989 Western

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Literature Association meeting. Due to efforts by scholars like as Lawrence Buell, whose ground-breaking 1995 work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), and *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005) ecocriticism quickly gained significance and reputation. What ecocritics do includes re-reading key works which engage a nature-based approach, with specific consideration of the depiction of nature and laying exceptional canonical emphasis on authors who centre on nature as an important subject of literary creation. Since literature possesses the capacity to address issues which cut across human experiences, environmental issues inclusive, then the need to advocate for the redemption and conservation of the physical environment becomes one of its key functions.

In literary scholarship, there has been a proliferation of creative works whose core preoccupation is the living/environmental conditions in Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Although the region faces other issues which some of her literature addresses; but the issue of environmental degradation is key and a more worrisome one; it is at the core and a landmark concern with which literature from the region is known for. According to a 2006 report released by World Wildlife Fund, it says concerning the Niger Delta: “The Niger Delta is one of the most polluted places on the face of the earth” (Watts 44).

No wonder these authors have remained truly committed to the demands of bringing to global knowledge the massive environmental devastation on human lives and the physical environment by multinational oil corporations through oil spills, gas flares and other ecologically-destructive practices. Aside the ugly manner and effect of oil exploration activities on the flora and fauna, the hazard on human lives is not only alarming, but has remained unchecked.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is also referred to as the oil-bearing region, because it is where almost a hundred percent of Nigeria’s crude oil is drawn from. This area of the country is typically considered to be located within nine coastal southern Nigerian states, which include: all six states from the South-south geopolitical zone (Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Edo and Delta states), one state from the South-west geopolitical zone (Ondo State) and two states from the South-east geopolitical zone (Abia and Imo) (Hogan 11).

This region has lived through untold infrastructural neglect from the federal government and from multinational corporations; she has witnessed unquantifiable damage on her agrarian and other natural resources, with no intention or programme geared towards remediation. The government of the day, even with their democratic cloak have flagrantly dashed the hopes of the Niger Delta people. At the frontline of this marginalisation racket is the elite, who “inflict the masses with ‘Ecotrauma’” (Onyema 205). But in all, this tragic environmental condition of the region has produced an enduring literature: “Just as the trauma of the civil war generated the Civil War Literature and the denial of rights to women produced Women’s Literature; poets, novelists, playwrights and literary critics, all decry the enormity of environmental abuse witnessed in the region... (Maduka 79). Hence, the emergence of the Niger Delta Literature.

It is this “Oil-fuelled disaster” and the associated crises which set the contextual background for the discourse of ecocriticism in the Niger Delta literature. This is a key concern expressed in Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*. Through her 2006 novel, which won the 2008 NLNG Prize for Literature, such issues as environmental despoliation, youth restiveness, betrayal and infrastructural neglect are brought to the fore

Biologically, Kaine Agary is from Isoko ethnic nationality in Delta State, Nigeria, but was born in the United States of America. Ten months after her birth, she moved to Nigeria and was raised in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Agary’s dream was not to be a creative writer, but after her training in Public Policy and engaging in research on the Niger Delta crises, she realised the need to put these issues in a novel. The concern of Kaine Agary, an indigene of the region and a stakeholder, can be summed as a conscious attempt to interrogate the abandonment of ecological stewardship in the Niger Delta by oil-prospecting bureaucracies and the Government of Nigeria. In the blurb of the book, Rumbidzai Bwerinofa described *Yellow-Yellow* as “a truly authentic narrative of a region.”

Methodologically, the paper adopts the qualitative research method in analyzing some of the crises limiting speedy development in the Niger as expressed in the text under review. The qualitative approach involves the use of non-numerical data and endeavours to analyse social realities of a particular population or place. The primary source of data is the selected literary text—*Yellow-Yellow*,

while the secondary sources are essays, journals and articles that are relevant to the title. The following are some of the crises that the essay seeks to examine: the crisis of environmental despoliation, the crisis of youth restiveness, the crisis of betrayal and the crisis of infrastructural neglect,

## 2. The crisis of environmental despoliation and depletion

The African story has been richly represented through creative writing; and the Niger Delta story is not excluded. Of the many challenges and concerns raised in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, environmental despoliation and depletion is prominent.

The Niger Delta is today dubbed the "predator's paradise" (Maduka 79), but the question is why is it so? Certainly, the ravages meted on the environment by capitalist oil multinational companies and the unpleasant effects it leaves on the people's mind and bodily health, especially the youths and women, are definitely the motivation for that label. Following this, *Yellow-Yellow* can rightly be referred to as an ecocritical novel, since it paints a picture of the morbid and gruesome brutality on the environment and the economy of the Niger Delta region, oil and the politics surrounding it among other issues.

Thus, the politics of oil is at the base of the tension, despoliation and "ecological imperialism" as Crosby puts it in his book, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe*. By "ecological imperialism", Crosby refers to a form of colonialism aimed at damaging as well as exploiting the environment and ecology of colonised countries by European nationals and their conglomerates (qtd in Nwagbara, 229). Certainly, this is a form of neo-colonialism. In the "ecological war", whoever holds political power more often, dominates the equation of change. Consequently, the oil multinational corporations in connivance with the government are not only at liberty to use the Niger Delta environment, but are also "licensed" to abuse it. Through the voice of her protagonist named, Zilayefa, Agary recounts the continued depletion and eventual loss of her community's main source of livelihood:

The community took the matter up with the oil company that owned the pipes, but they said they suspected sabotage by the youths and were not going to pay compensation for all the destruction that the burst pipes had caused. And so it was that in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance. 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 creations of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares... (*Yellow-Yellow* 4).

From the above, one can apprehend the narrator's pain and the communal woes, how the exploiters deplete and destroy the farming settlement and the aquatic life of the people; how the exploiters have impoverished the people, especially rural dwellers and how their hopes and aspirations have been scuttled. Zilayefa further laments the collapse of her mother's subsistence farming "industry":

The day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither...the black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unravelled the threads that held together her fantasies for me (*Yellow-Yellow* 10).

The fear of further ecological damage and a sense of grief, having been gravely exploited by British oil-giant, Shell Petroleum Development Company and her subsidiaries, are the propelling factors behind the ban Ogoni communities in Rivers State have jointly placed on oil exploration activities on all their lands and waterways.

What then is the meaning of this word, 'despoliation'? The word itself conveys or expresses the idea of robbery on a large scale; an act of pillage. It refers to the act of stripping and taking by force. The experience of the region when placed in parallel with Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, situated in the North-central part of the country, is a perfect proof that successive government in Nigeria have flagrantly stripped the Niger Delta of her wealth, resulting in an uneven development, where the Niger Delta is left wretched, naked and depleted. To quote Ojaide, the Nigerian government have continued to "throw enough green over desert dust" (qtd in Gomba 240). This cruelty on the land and people of the Niger Delta, sponsors the dystopian condition of the region.

### 3. The crisis of youth restiveness, prostitution and militancy

As the exploration of oil and the attendant politics continue to pose potential dangers to the existence of the people who occupy the geographical space referred to as the Niger Delta, confrontations or crisis of different shades emanating from the youths have become one, if not the most pragmatic means of resisting the devastation of their ecosystem and their future survival. Following this, many youths in the region have become disgruntled, losing confidence in the government, governmental policies/programmes, and choosing rather to take their destinies in their hands in whichever manner they deem fit.

While some youth groups in the region articulate their displeasure and demand for change through dialogue, consultations and peaceful demonstrations, other groups have negotiated the paths of violence, resistance, destruction of oil installations, kidnapping and militancy. As many political watchers and public affairs analyst in the region have observed, the problem of youth restiveness can be described as the after-effect of the politics of marginalisation suffered by the people of the region. This is what the narrator tells us with respect to marginalisation:

I would sit outside with boys and girls in my age group, we would listen to the radio, and sometimes we would hear an Ijaw person speaking about how the oil companies had destroyed our Niger Delta with impunity. They would discuss how the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying, while the wealth of their soil fed others...these broadcasts drive the boys in my village to violence...some of them joined the boys from other villages to kidnap oil company executives or bar oil company workers from doing their work (*Yellow-Yellow* 9).

It seems therefore that these were the boys who gradually metamorphosed into full-blown kidnapers, identifying themselves in groups like the Asiamas Freedom Army as they are called in Chimeka Garricks' novel entitled, *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* or the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) as they are so called in the Nigerian list of vanguard groups. In recent times, the agitations of these youth and the associated violence is spreading all across the Nine states of the region, assuming a worrisome dimension, from ideological to political as well as its unhealthy toll on the Nigeria's economy. One can boldly argue that kidnapping in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is now a money-making and lucrative 'business' for many youths, and this menace is fast spreading across other geopolitical zones of the country.

Prostitution is another dimension of crisis or social dislocation in the region. While prostitution is as old as the world itself, oil exploration activities, the influx of foreigners with debased character, the neglect of social institutions like schools and skills acquisition centres, are some of the factor that has heightened the act of prostitution among girls and women in the region. In *Yellow-Yellow*, it is clear that Zilayefa, the protagonist is the product of an out-of-wedlock affair between her mother, Bibi and the Greek expatriate oil company worker, whose name is Plato Papadopoulos. This is a common sight in many coastal communities in the region, especially those communities where the oil-rig is located. Many women and girls in an attempt to get some handouts or 'catch' a white lover or a well-paid oil company male staff, engage in unbridled sexual promiscuity; sadly, most of these relationships are fairly short-lived, as was the experience of Bibi, Zilayefa's mother.

I could find my way to a place like Bonny, the base of expatriate workers for the oil companies, and sell my body to a whitey. Some girls from my town did that in order to send money home to their sick families. They all had same look, whether they sold themselves in Warri, Bonny or in Port Harcourt (*Yellow-Yellow* 35).

Prostitution therefore, becomes an escape route for young girls, especially those whose parents cannot afford to meet their female needs. Even young, female secondary school leavers like Zilayefa began to consider it an option. Although she did not find her way to neither Warri nor Bonny, her journey to the city of Port Harcourt, which is a major oil hub in the Niger Delta region, opened her up to the experience of having sexual relationship with two men, such that when she suddenly realised that she was pregnant, she was unsure of who the father of her unborn child is; sensing she had no other option, she settled for an abortion. As she puts it, "I soon started to look for plants that resembled the ones girls in the village claimed were used to "wash out" belle...and I had seen a few that looked like the acclaimed ones for washing out belle." (*Yellow-Yellow* 176).

#### 4. The crisis of betrayal

Betrayal of trust is a major sponsor of the crisis in the Niger Delta region. The key actors in this drama of betrayal are the government, multinational corporations and the people themselves. It is this “abandonment of ecological stewardship in the Niger Delta by oil-prospecting bureaucracies and the government of Nigeria” (Nnamdi 67) that has resulted in total loss of confidence in the government and leadership of Nigeria by youths of the Niger Delta.

That successive government in Nigeria have not stayed true to the promises made to this people is evident. Many communities in this region have not felt any governmental presence in the form of new projects or renovation of moribund ones since the commencement of democratic leadership in 1999. This situation is further worsened when sons and daughters from the region are voted into elective positions as senators or representatives, yet are unable to attract a project to their constituencies. Of course, greed is a major problem of many Nigerian political office holders. During election, they recruit these helpless youths in electoral malpractices/violence, only to abandon them to their fate after they assume office.

Away from those in power who have the apparatus to improve the living standards of the people and to enforce legislations capable of making the multinational conglomerates more responsive and responsible to their hosts communities, yet are unwilling to do so, there is also the greedy community leaders, who in their greed would distort and divert any corporate social responsibility programme or equal distribution of welfare packages from some oil companies, just to feed and satisfy themselves at the expense of the entire community. This is what we find in this narrative:

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 (*Yellow-Yellow* 40).

The characterisation of the Amananowei reminds one of a character by the name, Chief Ikaki in Chimeka Garricks’ *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. Both characters are perfect examples of what Niyi Osundare calls “native executives holding forth for alien wolves” (46). Even though they are grassroot leaders, their style of leadership is such that “dissolves the people in confusion” (Fanon 61). In a country where there are ineffective environmental protection policies, even after reaching and documenting some agreement bothering on environmental protection, many oil multinational companies continue to operate insensitively, leaving the people with a completely devastated environment.

#### 5. The crisis of infrastructural neglect

The Ogoni uprising which hinged on ethnic autonomy, resource and environment control, was but a microcosm of the Niger Delta condition (Gedicks 10). In whichever front anyone would choose to examine the social and infrastructural conditions of the Niger Delta, it is clear that Ken Saro-Wiwa’s death was not just for the Ogoni ethnic nationality but it was for the entire Niger Delta. Saro-Wiwa didn’t just die for oil but for the overall development of oil-bearing communities. His death succeeded in creating the much-needed global awareness of the tragic conditions which have become common experience in many, if not all the oil-bearing communities in Nigeria.

Thankfully, Saro-Wiwa’s death achieved this, hence the United Nations Environmental Programme undertook an intensive study/assessment of the situation and thereafter, presented its devastating report which revealed gross infrastructural neglect, grotesque image of the area, the unimaginable loss and how poverty-stricken the Ogoni people have been rendered by the oil-mining activities of BP (British Petroleum) otherwise known as Shell Petroleum Development Company.

In *Yellow-Yellow*, the narrator bemoans the huge infrastructural neglect and was more displeased at the fact that the much-talked-about Niger Delta interventionist agency, which has the mandate to spread developmental projects across rural areas in the region, has never visited her community. She says,

I imagined that I could learn a skill like sewing through one of the skills acquisition programmes organised by the government agency set up to address the development needs of the Niger Delta. None of the programmes had reached my village since the agency was formed (43).

Instead of executing projects evenly, the common practice among indigenous Niger Deltans who work in these interventionist agencies is to select and execute a number of projects for their communities and residential areas only, leaving those communities who have no one representing them in government without any project. This betrayal at another dimension, thus Agary through her protagonist identifies it in the novel.

From the foregoing, one can be justified to argue that insincerity, greed and betrayal are major impediments to the development and infrastructural transformation of the region. The government and some of the elites in the region are even more dishonest and hypocritical. They are, like the proverbial two knives in the house of the widow; the one with handle is not sharp, and the one that is sharp has no handle.

## 6. Conclusion

The Niger Delta environmental crises are the offshoot of the ravages meted on the region's physical environment and inhabitants by the malevolent forces in government and the capitalist oil multinational corporations. While some schools have taken to condemning the outcome of these ills, this study has aligned itself with the school which seeks to identify the causes and offer solutions, though indirectly.

Regrettably, the youths who should be trained and mentored for the future development of the region, have lost confidence in the government and in some of their community leaders; they accuse these leaders of complicity, and have chosen to fight for their share of the oil-wealth through vicious means like violence, militancy and kidnapping. It is against this background that the Niger Delta literature projects a protest and conflict resolution consciousness. Thus, *Yellow-Yellow* can be described as a counter-discourse against environmental imperialism.

The paper advocates the need to protect the environment, the need to adopt eco-friendly practices in order to mitigate or resolve these crises. It also rejects the violent resistance as means to addressing the miseries of the Niger Delta people. Of course, violence, manifesting prominently in militancy, kidnapping and other forms of it, is counter-effective in the pursuit of environmental redemption. The paper therefore makes a case for commitment and peaceful resolution of these environmental issues by all stakeholders. Regardless of the ugly the sight, in spite of the worrisome dimension of these crises; the central thrust of all redemptive efforts should be geared towards the preservation of the human and non-human inhabitants of the environment. Certainly, nothing good would emerge from the environmental despoliation of the multinational oil corporation, nothing pleasant can be seen in the continued neglect of the environment by the government, and nothing worthy can be identified in the violence perpetrated by the youth.

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