

# Ecocritical Analysis of Kaine Angary's *Yellow-Yellow*

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Kaine Angary's (2006) *Yellow-Yellow* depicts the sordid conditions of the people in Niger-Delta, especially the women who are exposed to various exploitations as a result of the ecological problems of the environment. These ecological problems result to social ills in the society. Kaine Angary exposes the moral bankruptcy caused by joblessness, poverty, lack of social amenities, and environmental degradation in the Niger-Delta community. The author gives a vivid pictorial view of the patriarchal and cultural victimizations that the women are subjected to as a result of the horrible conditions in their environment. The women are sexually exploited by both foreign and local men because they need to survive in this hostile region that is suffocating. This paper explores the female predicament in the Niger-Delta region. It also explores the differences between the urban and rural communities in this region. Finally, it examines how the gains of exploration of oil elude the people who should have benefit greatly from the exploration of oil in the region.

**Keywords:** ecological, environmental degradation, victimization, exploitation, pollution, resources

## Introduction

Ecocriticism, according to Abrams and Harpham Geoffrey (2009), "designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment conducted with awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities" (p. 87).

Documentations of the natural environment in literary works are as old as man on earth. Right from creation to the present day, man has depicted the beauty of rural life, its simplicity, peace, and harmony that has been destroyed by urbanization and industrialization. There is the need to return to the perfect natural environment that has been devastated by human activities.

Most writers are concerned about the threats to the natural environment as a result of urbanization and industrialization. They also feel intensely the rapid and degree of human destruction of nature. To them, there is the increasing need to preserve what the natural environment remained. Hence, writers are concerned about the wanton degradation and destructing of the environment by sophisticated chemical pesticides which have affected wildlife, land, and water.

Men, especially the literary writers, are aware that the earth is in serious environmental crisis because of the industrial and chemical pollution on earth water and air. They are also concerned with the depletion of forests and natural resources and the near extinction of plants and animals as a result of human activities. All these are of great concern to literary writers and they form subject of his writing. It was as a result of this environmental crisis that ecocriticism was formed. Since it was formed, it has become a growing field of

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literary concern. Many ecocritical writings are geared toward creating the awareness on the part of the readers so that they can react positively to the annihilation of the natural life by man. This is because ecocritics are convinced that what is at stake is not only the comfort, but the survival of humanity at large.

This article therefore examines the effects of environmental exploitation on plants, aquatic, and human lives in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria using the novel entitled *Yellow-Yellow* by Kaine Angary (2006).

### **Ecocritical Degradation in *Yellow-Yellow***

*Yellow-Yellow* is about the story of a mulattress called Zilayefa raised solely by her mother, a peasant farmer in the village. Zilayefa's mother Bibi makes her best to ensure she is well-educated and avoids making the same mistakes she made in her tender age. Zilayefa is eager to live the village and experience city life. However, with the help of her church pastor, she moves to Port-Harcourt where she begins another life under the guidance of Bisi and Lolo.

In the novel *Yellow-Yellow*, the author discusses the issues of poverty and the Niger-Delta oil problems, sexuality, corruption, racial identity, and the search of a father figure by Zilayefa.

Right from the beginning of creation, the rural dwellers have regarded the soil as a means of sustenance. It supplies then all their human needs for meaningful existence. Hence, members of the Niger-Delta community who are purely farmers engage in agricultural activities. However, with the discovery of oil in the region, the activities of oil explorers have caused more harm than good to the people. This is vividly manifested in the novel when oil spillage destroys the farms of the people including that of Zilayefa's mother. The people are astonished and incapacitated; their immediate reaction is to protest and march to the house of Amananaowe, the traditional ruler of the community. Hence, Zilayefa says:

A group of people, painted in the same black as my mother, some covered from head to toe, was marching to see the Amananaowei, the head of the village, ... They were marching to the Amananaowei's house to report the matter and demand that he take it up with the oil company, some were crying, others were talking about compensation. (p. 4)

The company that owns the oil pipelines tells them that they are not compensating them because the spillage is as a result of the sabotage caused by the activities of the youths. This action goes to show the insensitivity of multi-national companies and capitalists in our society. The oil spillage causes the destruction of plants, animal, and aquatic life in the region. This leads to low agricultural productivity thereby causing untold hardship and poverty among the people.

The oil spillage also has psychological effect on the people. This is very glaring in the person of Bibi who refuses to talk to her daughter Zilayefa when Zilayefa wants to know what has happened to her. We can see that the Niger-Delta region is suffocating as a result of the activities of oil exploitation. This evil activity of oil exploitation in the region seems to support the assertion made by Catherine Obianuji Acholonu (1995) that the earth is:

Suffocating from humanity's waste, from all the fumes and chemicals humanity has been pumping into her blood (the rivers and oceans), and her body [the soil]. In this and other ways, we have been killing off not only our mother earth but also other occupants of the planet—our brethren—who comprise the vegetation, the mineral and the animal kingdom. (p. 118)

Man is not only killing the earth, but also he is destroying himself, his present, and his future.



The agony of the Niger-Delta people is similar to the misery suffered by the people of Ilmorog in Ngugi Wa Thiong's (1977) *Petals of Blood* when the capitalists move into their community with their roads, banks, factories, distilleries, and estate agencies and destroyed the peaceful and harmonious Ilmorog society. Hence, Eustance Palmer (1982) said:

The reader watches with profound sympathy of the bewildered and deceived peasants, unable to match the business acumen and financial standing of the big men from the city, inevitably lose their lands and all their possessions and degenerate helplessly into labourers or worse. (p. 294).

We can see that the activities of multi-national companies and the capitalists amount to total annihilation of the host community where they operate whether it is Niger-Delta in Nigeria or Ilmorog in Kenya.

Closely linked with the degradation and destruction of the Niger-Deltan environment by oil explorers is the sexual exploitation of women by both foreign and local men. After her secondary school education, Bibi, Zilayefa's mother, goes to Port-Harcourt where she was impregnated by a Greek sailor who leaves her unceremoniously without informing her. This makes the burden of the upbringing of Zilayefa rest solely on her mother. Zilayefa's mother denies herself of all social activities in order to be able to raise money for her education since she wants her daughter to be better than herself.

This self expulsion from all social activities is clearly stated in the novel when Zilayefa says:

...she expelled herself from the women's group so that she would not be forced to spend money on wrappers for their outings... better for me to save money. That was the end of woman's group activities for my mother and the beginning of her self-expulsion from all social activities. (p. 8)

The moral bankruptcy of the men is further exemplified in the novel when Chief Semoke dies and he was brought from Lagos to the village for burial. Zilayefa happens to be one of those serving the guests during the burial ceremony. During the ceremony, Zilayefa comes in contact with a white from Spain called Sergio who she thinks resembles her father. They immediately fall in love. She takes him to an Island across the village in a Canone far away from their house so that nobody especially her mother can see them. Zilayefa feeds Sergio with grill plantain and coconut; later they spend a moment together in cool kiss and love making before returning later in the night.

Expatriates working in oil companies seduce girls who migrate from the village to the city to engage in prostitution and Zilayefa wants to be in their league because whenever they come home, they attract a lot of publicity from the family members and they live expensive and lavish life. The white men give the girls a lot of money and buy expensive things for them. They rent flats for them and at time if the girls are lucky, they take them to their country. As a result of these mundane benefits, these girls consult native doctors to prepare love potion for them in order to win the love of these white men. However, some girls are equally dehumanized and manhandled by the white men. They push objects, like bottles into their privates as part of fun making. Hence, the novel states:

Our visitors told of times when they fell into hands of a crazy whitey who beat them up or pushed objects like bottles into their privates as part of the "fun". It seemed that, sometimes, there were so many unimaginable horrors to get through before the "Clients" released the money. (pp. 37-38)

Finally, Zilayefa goes to Port-Harcourt with the help of pastor Ikechukwu who gives her a letter to mama George otherwise called Bisi. We are told that Bisi is a high society woman who is equally a contractor with



government and oil companies. She also runs a boutique and owns a lot of property. She lives in GRA in Port-Harcourt. She is a first class social woman. Clara, one of Sisi employees, who Sisi hands over Zilayefa to while she travel to Aba with her friend Lolo educates Zilayefa on how to relate with Sisi and equally gives her the historical background of Lolo's life.

Lolo is also a high social woman who organizes parties for different class of people in the society. Both Sisi and Lolo are influenced by the present of European oil explorers in Port-Harcourt and they live morally debased life.

In Port-Harcourt, Zilayefa is still very optimistic of furthering her education and crowning it with a university degree. However, in the interim, she works in a royal hotel as a receptionist. Later, Zilayefa falls in love with Admiral who impregnates her. Instead of marrying her, he gives her money to abort the child. Zilayefa is easily attracted to men because she sees the image of her father in them. She wants the paternal feeling she has not experienced from her father. So, she sees every man as her father figure hence she easily falls in love with them.

One of the outcomes of the exploitation of oil in the Niger-Delta region is the invasion of the woman in the region by foreigners, such as the Portuguese, the British, Spanish, Syrians, Lebanese, and the Greeks businessmen and sailors. Their sexual relationship with the local woman results in the many numbers of yellows in Port-Harcourt. These yellows are stigmatized and called different names because of their complexion. Hence, Moses introduces Zilayefa as "Mami-Wata" to the other workers. This is because of Zilayefa's beautiful complexion. They call Emem a young Calabar girl whose mother was a product of hit-and-run with a Portuguese trader "Pussycat" because of her light green eyes which gives her a supernatural look.

Emem was a Calabar girl who had grown in Port-Harcourt. Her mother, like me, was the product of a hit-and-run with a Portuguese trader. Emem was a little darker than I was, but she had light green eyes that gave her a supernatural look and earned her the nickname "Pussycat". (p. 73)

Children of mixed race are often stigmatized and given derogatory names because of their skin complexion. Hence, the name Bisi is a name for a beautiful girl that is a prostitute and who easily attracts the attention of men. Zilayefa is called "Manmy-water" because of her complexion which is beautiful, light-skinned, and she is thought to possess a wily charm. This is why Zilayefa says:

I was referred to as Mammy-water. I do not think anyone really believed that I was a follower of the water's mother spirit, but I had one of the qualifying characteristics my complexion. Mammy-waters were said to be beautiful, light-skinned, and possessed of wily charm. (p. 71)

Emem is called "pussycat" because of her supernatural look which also attracts attention. Girls of mixed race are seen as conceited, promiscuous undisciplined, and confused. They are regarded as "born-troways". They are products of women of easy virtue. These various stigmas given to them make them to suffer from both social and psychological phobia. The immoral act of man in *Yellow-Yellow* confirms the view expressed by Ngone war Thiandum in *White Genesis* (Ousmane, 1972). She says: "People clad themselves in morality the better to cheat and deceive their neighbour. A man whose piety was legendary only adopted the pose so as to be better able to accomplish some unmentionable act of lust" (p. 30).

Ngone War Thiandum does not see any morality in men. The behaviour of men in both *White Genesis* and *Yellow-Yellow* is a glaring reflection of the moral decay and decadence ravaging the society.



Another major avert effect of oil exploration and exploitation in Niger-Delta is youth restiveness, violence, and pipe line vandalization. Many boys who are unable to complete their school education join the growing army fighting for justice in the Niger-Delta region. These youths steal, blackmail, and vandalize oil pipe lines. They claim to be fighting for the progress and recognition of the Ijaw people of the Niger-Delta. However, the capitalists that operate the oil companies use Nigerian armed forces to terrorize and brutalize them. Some of them are eliminated in various ways. Some are jailed, some disappeared mysteriously, and others are killed, while some are invited to meetings where they are poisoned. The sacrifice made by the youths of Niger-Delta is similar to that suffered by Penda in Sembene Ousmane's (1979) *God's Bits of Wood*. In *God's Bits of Wood*, Penda mobilizes the women against the French colozialists in Daker in support of the strike embarked upon by their husbands to attract good conditions of service, like the Niger-Delta youths. However, the avenging police who refuse them entry into Daker killed Penda. The youths in *Yellow-Yellow* and Penda in *God's Bits of Wood* are compared to Mhendi's wife and the other women in Peter Abrahams's (1977) *A Wreath for Udomo*, who in their defiance become the victims of imperial callousness. As Mhendi informs Lois:

The women didn't want to give up the homes and lands that had been theirs as far back as our history goes. So they turned on the whites who came to supervise the removal. My wife led the stoning party.... (p. 26)

In consequence, the authorities' fire killed 11 of them. The courage of the women in *A Wreath for Udomo* and that of Penda in *God's Bits of Wood* who sacrifice their lives in the struggle for their legitimate rights matches in intensity the activities and sacrifice of the Ijaw youths in *Yellow-Yellow*. The irony of the situation is that the foreign oil explorers and their Nigerian elite live in luxury why the peasants whose land is degraded and exploited live in abject poverty, penury, and squalor. Yet, millions of barrels of oil are pumped out of their land daily.

Another evil bedeviling the society which the author castigates vehemently is corruption. As a result of the corruption that is rampant everywhere, there is petrol shortage in the country. It is unbelievable that a country that exports crude oil has four refineries and exporting petrol yet; her citizens are suffering as a result of shortage of petrol. The people of Niger-Delta are expected to experience better life. However, the Minister of Petroleum that is from the region is after his personal comfort to the detriment of his people. Hence, the author says:

What was the Minister of Petroleum doing? Despite being a man from the Niger-Delta, there he was, sitting and feeding fat at the same table as the devils of government and oil companies and forgetting the starvation of his own home. (p. 111)

The level of corruption among government officials and the oil companies is so high that there is starvation, hardship, and unimaginable poverty and squalor amidst plenty of wealth. This unpalatable condition of the people validates the view held by Emmanuel Okogwa (2017) when he says:

...with the country's independence from Britain and the subsequent "oil boom" (a period of excess money generated from the sale of Petroleum products) that followed, coupled with mismanagement, the country experienced untold corruption, hunger, hardship and unimaginable poverty amidst plenty of wealth which has remained persistent till date. (p. II)

The luxurious flamboyant life style of the Minister of Petroleum is reminiscent of the corrupt life pattern of Koomson in Ayi Kwei Armah's (1969) *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born*. Hence, Robert Fraser (1980) says of Koomson:



Koomson's success is the result of moral laxity and ability to spot the main chance. From political involvement with the Dockers in the 1950s he was proceeded through the Ideological Institute at Winneba, the instant breeding ground for party hacks, to the ultimate accolade of a plum government appointment. In the bloated language of bureaucratic deference he is now "His Excellency Joseph Koomson, Minister Plerupitentiory, Member of the Presidential Commission, Hero of Socialist Labor. He now lives in one brasher residential estates that previously accommodated the envied colonizer. (p. 17)

Through corrupt means Koomson, an ordinary dock worker becomes very rich and goes after foreign things at the expense of local products.

In the novel *Yellow-Yellow*, the author also lampoons the corrupt policemen. The policemen in the cause of carrying out their official duty intimidate the people in order to extort money from them. This is vividly demonstrated in the novel with the encounter of Damiete and a police officer. The police officer, after checking Damiete's vehicle papers and they were up to date the same former stern looking policeman, tells Damiete: "'Bros, your brodas dey hungry here o!' he said with a smile. The same officer had lost his severe tone" (p. 112). The police are so corrupt, that if you have enough money, you can pay your way out of any trouble. These policemen are replica of the ones in Wale Okediran's (2004) *Strange Encounters* who pervert justice because they are bribed. In Wale Okediran's *Strange Encounters*, we see men, like Alhaji Adamu and Census continue to perpetuate their heinous crimes because the police provided them shelter. Alhaji Adamu pays the Divisional Police Officer every month in order to protect him. Policeman, like Inspector Chike collects bribe from the public before carrying out his official duty. The activities of the policemen in *Yellow-Yellow* and *Stranger Encounters* seem to validate the view held by Umelo Ojinmah (1991): "That a country that is born on cesspool of bribery and corruption was not mature enough to value democracy" (p. 30).

Through effective characterization, the author of *Yellow-Yellow* vividly brings out the ecological degradation, environmental pollution, and the social and moral dehumanization of the people of Niger-Delta region.

Bibi, Zilayefa's mother, represents the rural Niger-Delta women that have been ecologically and sexually exploited by foreign businessmen and oil company owners. They are abandoned after being exploited environmentally and sexually. They are uncatered for by both the foreigners and government who collaborate with them to exploit and dehumanize them.

Zilayefa, Sisi, and other mixed race children especially girls living in Warri and Port-Harcourt represent the products of the sexually abused women who are looking for their father figure. These outcasts are stigmatized, given derogatory names, and looked down upon by the society. They are called different demoralizing names, such as "Mammy-water", "pussycat", born-troways', "African profits", "ashawo pinks", and "father-unknowns". These names make people, like Zilayefa, Sisi, and other mixed race girls to suffer from both social and psychological phobia. Hence, many of them lament not knowing their fathers. These girls live morally bankrupt life in Port-Harcourt.

Men like the foreign businessmen oil company workers and Admiral represent the men who are morally and sexually debased. They are only interested in destroying what is pure in women. They are not attracted to these women as a result of genuine love. They are only interested in them as a result of the sexual pleasure they want from them. After debasing them sexually, they abandon them. These men exploit and degrade these women both environmentally and sexually. At the end, the women become social misfit and objects of ridicule in the society.



The foreign and local men sexually exploiting these women think that the more pleasure they seek from woman, the happier they become. So, after a hard day work, they seek happiness through excessive sexual pleasure. However, pleasure is not happiness. In fact, excessive pleasure is not happiness but an animal life. This view authenticates the statement made by Joseph Omoregbe (2004) when he says: "Indeed, a life of excessive pleasure is not a happy life but an animal life. Excessive drinking for example leads to unhappiness and the same is true of excess in sexual activity" (p. 27).

These foreign and local men should know that pleasure is for a while, transitory and it disappears as soon as the action it accompanies ends.

### Conclusion

From this paper, we can see vividly that the author of *Yellow-Yellow* has portrayed the evil consequences of the discovery of oil in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. The discovery of oil that is supposed to be a blessing to the people is now a curse because of the untold hardship and various exploitations they are subjected to. They are environmentally exploited; their farmlands polluted as a result of oil spillage. This oil also leads to the destruction of plants and aquatic lives in the region.

Apart from the environment degradation of the region, there is also sexual exploitation of the local women by foreign oil company owners. This leads to a large population of abandoned children who are morally and socially bankrupt. Also, the discovery of oil in the region leads to youth agitation, violence, and pipeline vandalization resulting to unnecessary loss of lives. We also see in this paper high rate of poverty as a result of the destruction of the people's means of survival. Another major outcome of the oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta region is high rate of corruption among the government officials and the policemen.

From the foregoing, it is my view that as a result of the hardship, the people of the Niger-Delta are subjected to as a result of oil exploration in the region, both the government and foreign oil companies should seek means to alleviate their misery and agony by devising various means of rehabilitating them and provide means of survival to compensate for their destroyed environment as a result of oil exploration and exploitation.

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