

## **Exploring the Concept of Childhood and Girls' Experiences in Nigerian Fiction: A Study of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Different people often witness or experience specific societal practices as they grow up in their respective cultural milieus. Literary writers cannot be alienated from these societal experiences. Many novelists in Africa therefore utilize fiction as a mirror for reflecting the experiences of people in different societies, as well as a window through which historical and social issues are viewed. Contemporary or Modern African fiction in its attempt to address the girl child question focuses attention on exposing the challenges and experiences of the female gender as well as recreating their images in order to create new and better personalities. Writers aim at girls' emancipation rather than bemoaning their subjection in society; depict them as struggling actively to attain freedom in order to overcome societal subjugation and challenges. Hence, writers have helped in recreating the image of the vulnerable in society; they have helped in bringing about the emergence of a new personality/character in control not only of her situation and destiny, but also of the opportunities hitherto denied her, for self-fulfillment. These experiences are thus manifested through different relationships. The paper demonstrates how Kaine Agary employed fiction to explore the experiences of the girl child in her novel, *Yellow-Yellow*. In the novel, the novelist creates female characters that help the readers understand the factors that cause violence on the female gender, especially in certain societies where societal challenges exist. This paper presents the view that societal problems or challenges are factors that push young girls to leave their home lands to a foreign land in search of greener pasture (wealth, success, better life). Hence, their struggle to succeed and other societal challenges (like rape, early marriage, brutality, sexual exploitation, and hunger) become the society's crime against the female gender. The negative consequence of this is that young women become preys to men and are often violated. This shatters their dreams and leaves them hopeless. This work adopts Feminism and Ecofeminism as its theoretical framework in order to understand the relationship between the characters and the effects of oil exploration activities on natural environment and the female gender in Niger Delta. Thus, the degradation of the environment and the place of the girl child become a major thrust of the work.

**Key words:** Childhood, Girl Child, African Literature, Feminism, Ecofeminism

### **INTRODUCTION**

African literature is a conduit through which African culture or experiences can be appraised. The African society is racked by affliction, disaster, macro-economic crisis, corruption, high level of illiteracy, squalor, hunger and other destabilizing conditions. The girl child has been consigned to a position of inferiority and she faces series of oppression and struggle as a result of societal problems. This study concerns the way children especially the girls in contemporary African fiction may be seen to be active in the construction of their own lives. Kaine Agary's novel, *Yellow-Yellow* is selected to further explore the above mentioned topic. The literary text has unfolded, on one hand, the particularity of children's experience

especially the girl child, on the other; it also emphasizes ways in which children are inevitably shaped by their contexts, whether historical or immediate. Agary has also revealed that childhood innocence has been stereotyped and corrupted by representing and exploring the bad, good, silenced, confused and evil in their protagonists. Thus, this paper examines the experiences of young adults with a special emphasis to the girl child. It finds out that the girl child is adversely affected by gender issues ranging from loss of identity, early marriage, sexual abuse and gender based labour division which affects the girl child's education. The paper brings out some major gender concerns that affect the girl child in Africa. It therefore questions how the girl child could escape the effects of gender issues that tend to affect her childhood and the later stage of adulthood. This article explores the plight of the African girl child in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* through a critical lens of postcolonial and feminist theory.

Feminism as a theory has generated a lot of controversies and criticisms both in Europe, Africa and the world at large. The term "Feminism" can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal and legal protection for women. Hence, it employs political, sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender differences in order to advocate for gender equality and women's rights/interests. Feminism thus seeks to highlight and fight oppression against the feminine gender. Feminist theory is an outgrowth of the general movement to empower women worldwide; it is a theoretical structure that presents convictions about the conditions of the female gender and the reasons for their mistreatment and gender imbalance. Feminist theory analyzes gender inequality; the social, the cultural, rather than the biological differences between male and female. Helen Chukwuma sees feminism as a "rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give women a sense of self worth, effectual and contributing to humanity" (85).

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie defines feminism as "an ideology of women, a body of social philosophy about women" (425). Ogundipe expresses the view that feminism is a social movement primarily informed and motivated by the experiences of women in society. The above definition incorporates different types of feminism such as Liberal Feminism, Socialist Feminism/Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism, Eco Feminism, Black Feminism, Snail-Sense Feminism, Right-wing, Left-wing, Centrist, Separatist, Non-aligned, Islamic etc. African feminism is a feminist philosophy that raised arguments which validate the experiences of the African women and African society against a mainstream of feminist discourse. Molara explains that:

Feminism is not a cry for any kind of sexual orientation and I am not homophobic heterosexist... Feminism is not the reversal of gender roles... Feminism is not penis envy or gender envy; waiting to be a man as they like to say to us, "well do you want to be a man? Or whatever you do you can't have a penis" Feminism is not necessarily oppositional to men...and is not opposed to African culture and heritage. (500)

Filomina Steady observes that "this African brand of feminism, includes female autonomy and co-operation, an emphasis on nature over culture; the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship. She further explains that true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and determination to be resourceful and relevant. Hence, majority of black women in Africa and Diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice" (356). Steady also enumerates the Socio-economic and class factors which contribute to

African women's oppression such as economic exploitation, sexual abuse and marginalization.

In African literature, Eco Feminism is a theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. It draws from and links both women movement and the environmental movement, thus drawing parallels between the domination and exploitation of both the women and natural environment. The concept was propounded by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to describe women's tendency to promote biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Recently, the term serves both as an environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism. In essence, Ecofeminists present the view that oppression of the natural environment and women can be examined together. Though the Feminist, Marxist and Postcolonial approaches to literature have dominated literary discourses in African literature; Ecocriticism (Eco Feminism) is making a new wave. The concern for the exploration of this concept heightened during the struggles in Niger Delta over the oil pollution which destroyed their natural environment thereby causing untold hardship to people. Eco Feminism therefore provides the basis for the exploration of the female gender's experiences. This paper brings to limelight the shifting relation between the Niger Delta environment and the negative effects of environmental pollution on young girls and women as documented by Kaine Agary in *Yellow-Yellow*.

Many writers like Tanure Ojaide, Kaine Agary, Niyi Osundare and others have explored the themes of ecological problems in their literary works. Thus, the disharmony and destruction caused by man's activities are vividly documented. Ojaide's *The Activist* and Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* discuss the themes of ecological problems exploring the issues of corruption, prostitution, politics, struggle and destruction. The above mentioned novels are exact in their presentation of the 'female gender' as a metaphor for nature. The protagonist in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Zilayefa and other young women represent the nature that has been plundered. Ojaide in his novel, *The Activist* presents a protagonist, Ebi as a symbol of the Niger Delta natural environment which refuses to be destroyed. Thus, both novelists present the view that the male plunder the women just as they plunder the land for oil, leaving them desolate, useless and abandoned. Hence, the abandonment of Zilayefa by Admiral and Sergio parallels the frustration of the Niger Delta people over the abandonment of their land by the oil companies and government.

## **THE MEANING AND CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD**

In Agya Boakye-Baten's view, 'Childhood should be understood within a cultural and social context. The social impetus of childhood should not be relegated to the realms of just a natural state. Children are social beings whose world is constructed within a historical and a cultural frame of reference. An attempt to universalize the concept of childhood leads not only to a misunderstanding of the world of children, but also is tantamount to interpretational fallacies' (105). Jenks explains that "childhood is not a brief physical inhibition of a Lilliputian world owned and ruled by others, childhood is rather a historical and cultural experience and its meaning, its interpretations and its interests reside within such contexts" (61).

A good concept to understanding childhood is given by Qvortrup who stipulates the structural approach of exploring childhood. Qvortrup explains that childhood is both a period in which children function as human and social beings and also as a category of a social class. Childhood is not just a period in children's lives, but is part of the social construct of every

society. Qvortrup further explains that childhood is an integral part of any society. Children affect and are also affected by the changes that occur in their society. Hence, changes in the social structure of any society have profound impact on the children in any society. This is to say that, changes in the economy of different societies invariably affect the economic roles of children. In the past most African societies considered children as economic assets for a family, thus it was a great asset to have many children. Hence, a man's wealth included his children, wives and sources of livelihood as presented by Achebe in his well acclaimed novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Agya Boakye-Baten also explains that 'in contemporary times, children have become both economic and social liabilities for their families. This is to say that, the concept of childhood is connected to many factors in a given society' (106). Qvortrup argues that children are part of the construction mechanism of childhood and society. Qvortrup points to the usefulness of children in society, but the nature and the context of their usefulness have undergone some changes. In spite of these changes, children and adults are both active participants in the construction of social realities in every society. ( See Qvortrup, J. 1994. *Childhood Matters: An Introduction*. In J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta, & H. Wintersberge (Eds.), *Childhood matters: social theory, Practice and Politics*, ( 1-23). Brookfield, VT: Aveburg).

Scheper-Hughes & Sargent explain that "childhood integrates both a biological and a social process. They state that childhood plays a central role in the organization of production and consumption within the home and in the transmission of genes, ideas, identities and property. Outside the home, childhood is the primary site of pedagogy and cultural learning. It is the primary nexus of mediation between public norms and private life" (1). Childhood embodies the cultural signifiers of identity, social order, and morality, which form the basis of the social fabric of all societies. Scheper-Hughes & Sargent further state that childhood "represents a cluster of discourses and practices surrounding sexuality and reproduction, love and protection, power and authority and their potential abuses" (2).

Agya Boakye-Baten suggests that 'it is important to understand that childhood as a social construction is very relevant within the African context. Children are vulnerable beings who are in need of their parents' protection and love. Thus, they naturally define the roles that parents play. The head of the family provides for the family; while mothers take care of the children and other household responsibilities. In essence, children are groomed to understand and assimilate the values of their family and society at large'(105-6). Onwauchi maintains that "the indigenous African societies educated their children through the on-going processes of life in their custom and values. Through their traditional tales and myths, the elders teach the children the moral ethical codes of behaviours and social relationship. Through certain religious rituals and practices, communal attainments of spiritual ideas were established. These spiritual ideals lay the foundation for the respect which the indigenous Africans have their political institutions; the love, respect and obedience which the children must show their parents and elders" (242).

Onwauchi further explains that culture" is the sum total of the integrated learned behaviour patterns characteristic of members of a society. It is the sum total of a people's customary way of doing things" (241). Culture is a learned process, which is transmitted from one generation to the other. A society continues to exist, if its cultural strategies of survival are impacted into the younger generation. This is the epitome of the importance of the child to Africans. Onwauchi maintains that in every society, irrespective of its level of social advancement, every child is born with the innate qualities of mind and body. Children are

socialized through the various institutional structures to acquire the cultural behaviours of the society.

In spite of the internal contradictions inherent in the African traditional system and its capacity to provide and protect its children, the social structure of Africa has undergone tremendous changes. These changes have undermined the ability of the social institutions within African societies to sustain practices and values, which defined children. Changes in the political, economic and the social institution have been the main culprits in the realignment of children within the cultural context of Africa. Factors like the impact of colonialism, education and globalization on the traditional African culture, and how children have ultimately been affected by these factors are discussed using Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*.

Colonial economy introduced the cash crop economy for the sole intent of making Africa the hub of raw material export. The concept of the urban area began to evolve. Men stayed for long periods away from their families, which culminated in changes in social behaviour patterns. (See Agya Boakye-Baten. 'Changes in the Concept of Childhood: Implications on Children in Ghana' in the Journal of International Social Research. Volume 3/10 Winter, 2010.Pp 105-8)

Valentine and Revson, explains that "...by going into town, both men and women had a chance to enjoy freedom from family discipline, and they subsequently became less submissive to the social controls which had governed their behaviour since early childhood" (464). Due to the dislocation caused by colonial political economy, many children lost their status as economic assets for their families and became economic liabilities. Political economic policies of colonial times did not only introduce institutionalized poverty, but also legitimized the use of children in labour force. Children as part of the labour force makeup of the colonial political economy of Africa however changed the concept of childhood and child rearing practices in contemporary African societies. Occupational patterns of the new political economy could not sustain the subsistence agricultural practices of the traditional African societies, and diminished the relevance of the extended family system, which provided support and production for children. Due to the factors discussed above, the notion of the child as a vulnerable member of society in need of protection and care was no longer tenable. The commercialization of children in contemporary Africa is one of the main factors that impinge upon the development of the child today. (See Agya Boakye-Baten. 'Changes in the Concept of Childhood: Implications on Children in Ghana' in the Journal of International Social Research. Volume 3/10 Winter, 2010.Pp 105-8)

## **THE GIRL CHILD IN AFRICAN FICTION**

A girl is a female human from birth through childhood and adolescence to attainment of adulthood when she becomes a woman. The term, girl may also be used to mean a young woman, is often used as a synonym for daughter" (Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary,2008) .

A girl child is described as a female child between infancy and early adulthood. She is also described as a young female human being or a young adult. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, New 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, the word, 'girl' refers "to a female child or a young woman" (628). During the period of development of the girl child, she is under the custody and supervision of adults who may be her parents or guardians and siblings who are older and more mature than herself. The girl child is easily influenced by her experiences as she develops. She models her behaviour during this developmental process through observations and imitations of those she depends on. Her physical, mental and emotional developments start and reach their peak within this stage.

In attempting to establish the relationship between the society and the girl child, certain pertinent questions relating to how the child is received and related with in her contemporary society are considered. These questions are: What are the struggles, challenges and oppression faced by the girl child? What are the factors that affect the girl child? Hence, it is important to answer the above stated questions in order to find a solution to the problems that have affected the girl child negatively.

It is also important to note that from the family circle to the public sphere, the girl child has suffered much hardship and has been greatly dehumanized. This is due to the fact that she is considered vulnerable to situations around her. She is less valued, appreciated and a second class citizen in a society ruled by male ego just as Buchi Emecheta presents in her novel, *Second Class Citizen*. In especially most African societies, the girl child has been consigned to an inferior status for which she is constantly stereotyped. The African society is a society with a tradition that bestows importance to the male gender, neglecting the female gender. This patriarchal ideology has influenced the way the girl characters are projected by male writers in their literary texts. In most literary works, female characters are noted for one of these images: prostitute, girlfriend, mistress, and maids. However, these are evident in the novels listed below: Zilayefa is Admiral and Sergio's girl friend in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Emem, a young girl with Nigerian and Portuguese parentage, prostitute in the above mentioned novel, Clara is Obi's lover in Chinua Achebe's *No long at Ease*; Elsie in *A Man of the People* by Achebe is Odili's girlfriend and later becomes chief Nanga's girlfriend; These images of the female character support Chukwuma's assertion that:

The female character in African fiction... is a facile lack luster human being, the quiet member of a household only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters...Docility and complete submission of will is demanded and enacted from her.(131)

The paper brings out some major gender issues that affect the girl child in African literature. The paper therefore questions how the girl child can escape the effect of gender issues that tend to affect the girl child's present and later stage of adulthood. Some early writers like Achebe and Ekwensi painted the picture of the girl child as one whose destiny is subject to the whims of her male folks. Writers are mostly influenced by their environment and circumstance in history which help to shape their society. Yvonne Vera, Kaine Agary, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and others portrayed their society through their works. Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* portrays the oppression and hardship faced by the girl child as a result of the dreadful and traumatizing encounter between Africans and the white racists. It is believed that the encounter between the Europeans and Africans left Africans with disconcerting problems. These issues are as a result of the dreadful means in which the encounter occurred such as slavery, colonialism etc.

Kaine Agary is one of Nigeria's contemporary writers who have explored the experiences of the girl child while commenting on social issues. The setting of *Yellow-Yellow* is the oil region of Nigeria, Warri, and Port Harcourt (Delta region). The novel explores the historical facts about the Nigerian society in the early 19th century. During this period, Nigeria was invaded and colonized by the British under the guise of religion. Both human and natural resources were exploited; men and women were captured as slaves and forcefully transported to western countries to work in their plantation. In this period also, oil exploration became rampant in Nigeria and was pioneered by the Shell Development Company of Nigeria

Limited which has its base in Warri. The activities of these oil companies have destroyed the natural environment of the Niger Delta people as a result constant drilling of oil and spillage. The oil industry had been boosting the country's income over the years, but the Niger Delta region has greatly suffered as a result of these activities. The people had been neglected and the land had been underdeveloped for years; sources of livelihood had gone into extinction as a result of oil spillage and contamination. Hence, physical aggression and agitation became the only medium of communicating their poor conditions to the government and society at large. In order to survive, many young girls resort to prostitution, while the boy became kidnapers. The girls were mainly patronized by foreigners who were grand masters in the act exploiting women. Other Nigerian bourgeoisies followed in their examples and the situation became worst.

Based on the review of the biography and historical background of Kaine Agary, it would be appropriate to state that the struggles, and the experiences, of the girl child were as a result of the encounter with the whites which has degraded the African society. The Europeans still continued to control the economic activities of Africa by placing African bourgeoisies in key positions to ensure dominance over their colonies. By so doing, African continent remains dependent on the West. This is what Agary depicts and communicates in *Yellow-Yellow*, with particular emphasis on the predicament of the girl child. Agary depicts how a teenage girl, Zilayefa develops her personality through various experiences; hence she develops into adulthood through knowledge and experiences.

#### **EXPERIENCES OF THE GIRL CHILD IN KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW***

In *Yellow-Yellow* by Kaine Agary, the activities of the western oil company destroyed the dreams of the girl (Zilayefa) and the society has deprived her of a better life, forcing her into endless struggle as a result of political and economic marginalization ravaging the Niger Delta. *Yellow-Yellow* is a novel written from the female perspective on the Niger Delta issues. It presents the difficulties of the Niger Delta people and their endless struggle for survival. It details difficulties growing up under the military regime in a region racked by neocolonial exploitation, environmental degradation and social destruction perpetuated by the Western oil companies. The novel is centered on the experiences of a girl named Zilayefa, a teenage girl with Greek and Nigerian parentage, who leaves her rustic environment and the protective grip of her mother in search of greener pastures in the city of Port Harcourt. The novel begins with an oil spill, depicting the degradation of the Niger Delta regional environment. This ruins Zilayefa mother's farm land which is their source of livelihood. According to Zilayefa:

I left them and ran to my mother's farm. It was the first time I saw what crude oil looked like. I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop, when it would stop, how far it would spread. (4)

The pollution of the Niger Delta landscape creates a detachment from the society's moral values and innocence; hence the female gender becomes victims of human exploitation and injustice. Through Zilayefa's narration, the reader understands the negative consequences of oil spillage which shattered the future of the protagonist, her mother and others:

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 creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares ... (4)

Zilayefa captures the disaster, danger, starvation, and death that would befall the people; all these paint the image of a bleak future, hope, moral and environmental decay since the destruction of the Niger Delta environment is the destruction of their means of livelihood. According to her, “the day my mother’s farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither, but she carried on watering it with hope. The black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother’s crops and unraveled the threads that held together her fantasies for me” (10). The narrator, Zilayefa shifts the reader’s attention from the destruction of the oil spillage and recounts the circumstances surrounding her birth and why she is referred to as yellow yellow:

“Yellow-Yellow”. That is what most people in my village called me because of my complexion, the product of a Greek father and an Ijaw mother. My father was a sailor whose ship had docked briefly in Nigeria about one year before I was born. After months at sea, he was just happy to see a woman and would have told her anything to have her company. The woman he chose was my mother, a young and naïve eighteen-year old who had just moved to Port Harcourt from her small village with visions of instant prosperity. She had completed her secondary school education and had passed her school-leaving examinations. With that qualification, she hoped to get a good job in Port Harcourt. (7)

Zilayefa narrates how her mother met her father at a disco and fell in love with him. She assumes that she has found a lover and life partner, but is disillusioned by the sudden disappearance of the man. The man disappears, leaving behind his planted seed (Zilayefa) in Zilayefa’s mother’s belly. Out of frustration and disillusionment, Zilayefa’s mother returns to her village to face the shame of her pregnancy. Zilayefa laments:

Disillusioned, my mother went back to her village to face the shame of being an unwed mother with nothing but dreams about my future. 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. With the proceeds, she was able to feed us and pay my school fees. She took care of all my needs and even went without sometimes to make sure that I got education. For instance, she expelled herself from the women’s group so that she would not be forced to spend money on wrappers for their outings. (8)

The protagonist, Zilayefa also narrates the struggle and hardship encountered in her village as a result of the environmental degradation which has rendered the entire community impotent. As a result of the hardship, she develops a fantasy as a means of escaping from her frustrating rural hardship and unhealthy environment. She dreams of leaving her village to another city where she could make some money. Her closeness with Sergio, an antique-furniture dealer from Spain offers her great hope of leading a life different from her mother’s dream. According to her, “before my encounter with Sergio, my life had been without direction. I did not know what I wanted to do, and I did not care, either. Up to that point, I had spent my life



realising my mother's dream that I gain admission into the university and become a graduate (31)". Zilayefa becomes disappointed when Sergio left her village without a good bye. She confesses:

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. Nothing brought me joy. I had so desperately believed that he would take me away with him, because that was part of the perfect scenario woven in my dreams. My head was crammed with thoughts of how I would make it to a city-Port Harcourt, Lagos, anywhere! (34)

The struggle for survival starts with Zilayefa's mother, Ina Binaebi, who becomes a mother at eighteen following an affair with a Greek sailor and ends with Zilayefa's own struggle to stay alive after being sexually exploited. In her attempt to uphold her virtue, Zilayefa subtly, stops Sergio from having sex with her during one of his visits. She narrates her experience:

Sergio had not tried to swallow my face or push his tongue down my throat, and he did not insist when I stopped his hand from exploring under the skirt of my dress. I closed my eyes and allowed the feeling from the kiss to linger as we lay down on my wrapper; he pulled me close and placed my head on his chest" (27).

Sergio's sudden disappearance leaves Zilayefa sad and hopeless. She however consoles herself while waiting for him: "I tried to take long deep breaths, hoping that I would feel better, and I told myself he would still come that night. He was not a Greek sailor. He was Sergio, the man whom I had taken to my special hideaway, the man who had kissed me so tenderly and made me feel butterflies in my stomach, the man whose voice mesmerized me, the one who was my ticket out of the village"(28).

*Yellow-Yellow* makes a clear connection between the exploitation of the oil in the Niger Delta rustic environment and the exploitation of the female gender, especially the young girls. The activities of the multinational oil companies have resulted in the abuse and pollution of natural environment as well as the bodies of the Niger Delta young girls. The nefarious activities of people who work in these companies have also contributed in destroying the future and dreams of these young girls. To survive, many girls yield to men's sexual pressure and make money in return. Zilayefa narrates their experiences as girls:

Many young girls were eager to follow in the path of these visitors. They dreamed of a life that would allow them enough cash to buy nice clothes, send money home once a month, and make the occasional impressive visits to the village. When our visitors had the ears of those young girls eager to follow in their path and taste the life they were living, they would reveal the rules of the cutthroat game of survival they played wherever they were situated. (37)

The young girls are desperate to sell their bodies to white men because their means of livelihood have been destroyed and this makes them resort to prostitution as a quick means of survival. Thus, they are exposed to various forms of brutality, sexual exploitation and eventually death as seen in the quotation below:

The whiteys were always the catch of the day. Whiteys gave a lot of money; bought gifts; rented flats for their girls; and, if the girls were lucky and had the right native doctor, they could get their whiteys to fall in love with them and maybe take them away to whitey's home country. The Filipinos and the Chinkos did not give as much money, but they bought many gifts, and they were definitely better than the sykrawkraws (the local men)... ( 37)

The tortures these girls go through affect them physically and psychologically. Though they live in the city, wear makeup and stylish clothes; yet they always look tired, stressed out (*Yellow-Yellow* 35). Many of them become object of sexual display for foreign expatriate of oil companies all in a bid to mak money. Hence, the respect for feminine values is neglected for selfish reasons and gains. The narrator recounts the story told by some of the girls who were in the business of prostitution in places like Bonny, Warri and Port Harcourt. The extract below buttresses the girls' experiences and the extent of physical exploitation and pollution of the girls' body in the Niger Delta region. Sometimes, the whiteys while exploiting the teenage girls sexually end up beating or pushing objects into their privates as part of the fun. Zilayefa recounts:

Our visitors told of times when they fell into the 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. Nevertheless, if one were lucky, before they made the mistake of taking off with one of these crazy whiteys, someone else who had experienced his brutality would tactically stop them and warn them off him (*Yellow-Yellow* 37-38)

Many young girls suffer in the hands of men in order to survive and carter for their families in the village. Thus, men out of their greed exploit the girls' vulnerability in exchange for raw cash. Zilayefa's thoughts are not different from others. Many thoughts race through her mind; she confesses; "I could find my way to a place like Bonny , the base of expatriates working for the oil companies, and sell my body to a whitey. Some of the girls from my town did that in order to send money home to their families" (*Yellow-Yellow* 35).

Zilayefa out of frustration caused by the environmental pollution does not mind the nature of the job. She is desperate to the extent that she became adamant of her mother's warnings and confesses that "if prostitution will feed me, then I'll prostitute no problem" (*Yellow-Yellow* 43). She finally leaves her village for Port Harcourt where the reality of other girls' experiences becomes vivid. The rivers, farms and other sources of income have been polluted by oil, and the city holds a promising future for her survival. She resents her mother's warning ("You are not serious; you want to spoil your life. Beautiful girl like you wants to go and throw away her life in Port Harcourt?" (*Yellow-Yellow* 43) and expresses her desire to escape the village to Port Harcourt. Zilayefa's decision is made as a result of the economic exploitation born out of neocolonial imperialism.

The young girls who are hawking their bodies are looking for greener pastures. The whites are sought after for means of livelihood. Girls are forced to do this because of the economic situation. The narrator explains that the skilled acquisition programmes organized by the

government in order to address the development needs of the Niger Delta never reached their village. On that note, she decides to leave for the city to get a better chance of getting job.

Agary portrays the prevalent situations in the Niger delta region; a region racked by neocolonial exploitation, environmental degradation, corruption and social destruction caused by the Western oil companies. She mirrors the disastrous effect of human and environmental pollution on the Niger Delta. Thus, what one sees is a society abused and plundered with the collaboration of local officials and corrupt government bureaucrats. The fundamental issue is exploitation which brings about degradation and other disconcerting issues. Agary paints a sordid picture of how the indigenes of the Niger Delta are exploited humanly and naturally. Girls are being exploited sexually of their womanhood by men (foreigners and local men). Binabei for instance, was exploited at a tender age of eighteen by a Greek sailor and the product was Zilayefa, her daughter.

He was just happy to see a woman and would have told her anything to have her company. The woman he choose was my mother who had just moved to Port Harcourt... she believed that she had found her life partner that this man would take care of her... she went to port to look for him one day, as she had become her habit, and was told that his ship had left... leaving behind his planted seed in my mother's belle. (7)

Zilayefa's mother, Binabei, is left to cater for her and her unborn child. Also, Emem, another character whose birth circumstance is similar to that of Zilayefa is also "the product of a hit and run with a Portuguese trader". (73) The narrator allows us to understand that this trend was rampant and had led to many of them regarded as born troways.

As the physical environment of Niger Delta is exploited and destroyed by the oil companies and greedy officials; its young women are also devoured, exploited, polluted and finally destroyed by the same group of people. Selfish and greedy men like Sergio and Admiral are the satirical portraits of men who destroyed the future of young girls through their nefarious activities and male dominated ego. Admiral's protective and exploitative nature serves as destructive forces that ruined the seventeen year old Zilayefa. His exploitation of young girls like Zilayefa is synonymous with the activities of the oil companies in Niger Delta which later hampered her future. Zilayefa narrates:

He pulled back a little. Stop saying that and stop calling me sir. Do you realize how many times you have said that since we started this conversation? He put his hand on my shoulder reassuringly and let his fingers roam, massaging me softly until he was playing with the little hairs at my nape (131).

Admiral's overbearing attitude dominates and overshadows Zilayefa; she feels uncomfortable, caged and suppressed when she finally yielded to his selfish request of becoming his mistress. A seventeen year old girl, Zilayefa yields herself to the pressure of a sixty-one year old man who is married and old enough to be her father. Admiral Kenneth is an old politician who played a major role in ruining the life of Zilayefa. He is supposed to fill the void in Zilayefa's life as a father figure, but ends up as her lover or sugar daddy. He represents the government and leadership in the sense that Ijaw/Itsekiri youths consult him over community matters for advice.

Sergio, a fifty-eight year old man from Spain also contributes to ruining the life of this young girl, Zilayefa. Although Zilayefa loses her purity in the hands of Admiral, Sergio cunningly seduces her for his own selfish feelings in his guest house at Port Harcourt. Admiral and Sergio have succeeded in sexually exploiting Zilayefa leaving her pregnant, confused and shattered.

The result of their acts (pregnancy) brings depression which made Zilayefa commit abortion ignoring the consequences of her decision. The decision for committing abortion is borne out of disillusionment and frustration in not fulfilling her mother's dream, not heeding to her advice and lastly for repeating the same mistake her mother made as a young girl. Zilayefa confesses:

Then one thought suppressed all others - I could take care of my problem myself, cover my shame, and look forward to my tomorrow with clean slate. I soon started looking for plants that resembled the ones that girls in the village claimed were used to "wash out" belle... (176).

I returned to my room later and chewed up the plants I had picked, leaf and bark together. Some were so bitter I had to force them down with water. The bitterness did not matter much as I willed myself to swallow and hold down every substance that I chewed out of the plants. I did not know what to expect, what to expect, what I would feel, or if I would live to see the next day. However, if I lived, it was an opportunity for a personal rebirth along with Nigeria. I promised God and myself that I would focus only on completing my education and making my mother, Sisi, and Lolo proud of me (177).

The degradation caused by oil spillage destroys not only the villager's sources of income, but also exploits and shatters the dreams of many young girls and boys. Young boys as a result of their parent's inability to meet up with their academic demands, drop out of school, join militant groups to fight the oil companies and the government: while young girls take to prostitution so as to survive. Binabei is Zilayefa's mother, the protagonist of the novel. She wants the best for her daughter and works extra hard to give her a bright future.

She believes that education is the basic tool that changes a person's life and to prevent recurrence of her past, she works tirelessly to educate her daughter. At eighteen, Binabei after graduating from secondary school travels to Port Harcourt in search of a better life. She ends up pregnant and her dream of a better future shatters. In order to amend her mistake; she transfers all her dreams to her daughter, believing that she will fulfill her dream and achieve greatness. Zilayefa's inability to fulfill her mother's dream shatters her and leaves her to her fate. Emem's advice lures Zilayefa into accepting Admiral's advances. She lacks her mother's advice during her stay in Port Harcourt and as a result; she listens to Emem, her friend who convinces her to date Admiral. She accepts Emem's advice and at the end she becomes pregnant. Emem is a Calabar girl who had grown up in Port Harcourt. Her mother is also a product of a hit-and-run with a Portuguese trader (73). Emem's behaviour, advice and quest for material things pushed Zilayefa to go against her mother's values and dreams. As a colleague and friend at Royal Hotel, Emem succeeds in influencing Zilayefa negatively.

## CONCLUSION

Kaine Agary's novel, *Yellow-Yellow* explores the relationship between the physical abuse of the environment and the exploitation of human bodies, especially the female gender. The

novel through the lens of environmental degradation and oil exploitation in Niger Delta mirrors the destruction of young women and their sources of livelihood. The novel is also concerned with the socio-cultural effects of oil exploitation on nature and women in Niger Delta region. It explores the place of women in the face of societal, cultural and environmental challenges. The major thrust of this research is that ecological discourses constitute a new trend in African literature which critically explores the experiences of the girl child in relation to her environment. Agary paints a sordid picture of young girls whose bodies are sexually exploited and polluted like the landscape of Niger Delta.

In *Yellow-Yellow*, the image of pollution captures and brings to lime light other activities that contribute to the act of pollution such as environmental degradation, hunger, brutality, bribery, and prostitution etc. Agary's protagonist is a product (fruit) of moral decadence and young girls like her are generally referred to in the novel as *African profits*, "*born-troways, ashawo pickins, and father unknown*" (*Yellow-Yellow* 171). These include Ibinaebi's daughter, Zilayefa, and Emem, her friend and colleague at work. Zilayefa's mother Binaebi was sexually exploited and impregnated by a Greek sailor, later on in the novel; her daughter was also exploited by two elderly married men (Admiral and Sergio). Emem's mother was also sexually exploited by a Portuguese trader and her loose parental background corrupted her moral values. Like the physical Niger Delta environment, these women were destroyed and robbed of their dreams and happiness. The fact remains that these young women were sexually exploited and abandoned to their fate. They suffered shame, dejection, humiliation, hardship and loneliness as single mothers. After the pollution of the young women's bodies, there were remarkable alterations in the bodies – pregnancy; this left their dreams shattered and their future bleak thereby generating a cyclic nature of poverty, hunger, materialism, stigmatization and moral decadence among girls in society.

The title of the novel, *Yellow-Yellow* is the nickname of the main character, Zilayefa. The name, 'Yellow Yellow' captures the character, her mixed parental background and the colours of oil which makes it a perfect imagery for the exploration of varied experiences. *Yellow-Yellow* was the author's response to the frustration she felt from meeting many Nigerians who were ignorant of the issues in the Niger-Delta. In order to sensitize the public, Agary presented an unsentimental account and humiliating experiences of the people of Niger-Delta in her novel to mirror this aspect of social reality.

Novelists and dramatists like Flora Nwapa's (1931–1993) *Efuru* (1967), Buchi Emecheta (1944), Ama Ata Aidoo (1942), Ifeoma Okoye, Nawal El Saadawi (1975), Yvonne Vera, Zaynab Alkali (1955), Nadine Gordimer (1923), Maryam Tlali (1933), Bessie Head (1937–1986), Grace Ogot (1930) Efua Sutherland (1924), Zulu Sofola (1938), and Tess Onwueme (1955) have written their works to fully explore or portray the experiences of the girl child in African literature. The researcher has come to the conclusion that education for the girl child in Africa is one of the tools for challenging gender based violence and exploitation in the contemporary society since societal problems expose girls to many challenges and humiliating experiences.

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