

DISPOSSESSION AND DISPLACEMENT AS FORMS OF SLOW VIOLENCE IN KAINÉ AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW*

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Abstract

This paper examines dispossession and displacement as manifestations of Slow Violence in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. With focus on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence within the framework of Postcolonial Ecocriticism, the paper argues that dispossession, especially with respect to land as economic capital, and environmental displacement resulting from the activities of petroleum extraction operate as gradual yet attritional forms of violence dispersed across time and space rather than through spectacular events. Through close reading and interpretation of textual data, the paper underscores how petroleum extraction disrupts indigenous livelihoods, undermines communal bonds and forces both physical and psychological displacement amongst the people of the Niger Delta. Narrated within the context of the prevailing discourses on the Niger Delta environmental problems, Agary deploys adolescent feminist voice to tell the story of women's fate in a male dominant environment of the Niger Delta where the culture of patriarchy engenders slow violence to intersect with gender, thereby, revealing how women bear disproportionate burdens of dispossession and displacement, thus, becoming economically and socially susceptible in the society. By critically framing dispossession and displacement as forms of slow violence, this paper contributes to the Niger Delta literary scholarship as it interprets *Yellow-Yellow* as a major critique of environmental exploitation and its long-term consequences upon the well-being of indigenes and women.

Keywords: Slow Violence, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Niger Delta, Dispossession and Displacement.

Introduction

This paper critically discusses Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* within the context of the Niger Delta postcolonial novel. Following the narrative, the paper confirms Agary as a veritable voice speaking about how the exploitation of the Niger Delta environment as in the activities of petroleum extraction has had adverse effect on the indigenes with remarkable concern for the women, especially as they have been dispossessed and displaced economically and socially. Therefore, analysing the novel in relation to the environmental dangers in dispossession and displacement, the paper adopts Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence in Postcolonial Ecocriticism to discuss the ongoing yet hardly noticed consequences of these dangers on the people of the Niger Delta, especially women.

The idea of slow violence comes from Nixon's discussion on the environmentalism of the poor where he explained slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (pp 2-3). His description of slow violence is typical of the imaginative creation of the environmentally challenged Niger Delta in *Yellow-Yellow*. His definition of the concept calls the paper's attention to the impact of human activities on the environment, especially the abuse of natural resources based primarily on capitalist interest. In the similar vein, postcolonial ecocriticism is essentially an environmental oriented theory embedded in the social, economic and cultural experiences of a people formerly colonised. Udumukwu locates the definition of the theory based on ecological issues-cum-postcolonial experience[s] (p.369). On the other hand, postcolonial ecocriticism deals with the postcolonial representation of environmental experiences after colonialism in literary studies.

Discussion

Until Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, the deplorable condition of the Niger Delta ecosystem and ecosystem services caused by petroleum extraction and exploitation of other environmental resources, especially land with the many works of fiction it has inspired, has hardly been represented through the perspective of a woman who happens to be a co-traveller with man on the path of their impending fate in the environment. The woman too wails for her losses, dispossession and displacement as she continues to experience them in the surroundings she shares with man. From the works of earlier novelists before Agary, this paper finds this narrative exclusion of the woman's voice echoing from ecological ruination as a denial to bring to the fore the stake of women in the environment. However, it is in *Yellow-Yellow* we realise the importance of the collective voice of women represented by the narrator, Zilayefa, about the ongoing environmental problems with its attendant experiences of economic dispossession and emotional displacement as forms of slow violence in the Niger Delta.

Therefore, narrating from the perspective of an ecologically aggrieved young woman (Zilayefa) to tell the painful story of a damaged environment and its consequences gives Agary's novel a new dimension of the stake of women in the eco-system hitherto neglected. The novelist perspicaciously blends the physical and the emotional subtlety of the story by mediating between series of events and the point of view of an adolescent girl, who, following the loss of her mother's farmland through an intervening spillage of oil cannot survive the dream her mother has envisaged for her.

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* starts its story by announcing an environmental misery caused by a non-living but corrosive agent of oil spillage that ever remains a problem in Bibi's dream for Zilayefa "During my second to last year in secondary school, one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village broke and spilled oil over several hectares of land, my mother's farm included (p.3)". The narrator reveals that the farmland her mother lost to oil spillage has been a prize portion

of cultivating space that her mother inherited from her own parents “She has inherited a small piece of land from her family, which she farmed, and sometimes she would go fishing (p.8)”.

Being a cultivating ground, therefore, the farmland remains an economic capital for which Bibi’s incubated dream for Zilayefa would be hatched. Regrettably, she is dispossessed of her farmland that holds together for her and her daughter everything good in future as her daughter tells “In her dreams, I would go on to university and study a subject that would get me a good job with enough income to take care of myself. If I could take care of myself, then I could take care of her” (p.10).

Nevertheless, despite this expectation the narrator tells that:

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 unraveled the threads that held together her fantasies for me (p.10).

Zilayefa’s account of how the black oil has damaged her mother’s farmland signifies a dream deferred and ultimate slow violence. Now, being affected by the experiences of hardship following her mother’s loss of the farmland, Zilayefa is curious to leave the rustic and moribund experiences of village life. Her curiosity further enlarges as she seeks to step out from the watch of her mother and leaves independently to explore her feminine possibilities outside the village circle. She becomes even more worried the moment she has finished her secondary education and looks forward to be independent, not to be bothered by her mother under the guise of a protective care:

In her mind, she would find a way to make sure I completed my education. I did not care as much as she did about finishing school; I just wanted to leave the village. The sameness of life in the village would kill me if I did not

escape. All my life, I had always had something to do. Always had something planned for me by my mother (pp.10-11).

Again, the strong desire of the narrator to escape from the grip of her mother expresses itself in every opportunity she has availed herself to explore the deeper feeling of being together with peers, especially with the opposite sex. She tells us of one such occasion at Mama Ebiye's house where she does not only listen to the blaring voice of Robert Ebizmor, but picks a particular interest in part of the song where the amplifying voice of the singer fills the air, inciting the body chemistry of the boys and girls to dance acrobatically:

Robert Ebizmor's voice blared from the radio sitting on the front window of Mama Ebiye's house. The young people in my age group had taken up her frontage, dancing as Robert instructed us girls to throw our backsides and the boys to pick them up. We were having so much fun until I heard my mother's stern voice behind me (p.15).

As it is in every society, the moment a growing, young adult feels trapped in an enclosure, the anxiety for freedom and independence becomes a major concern for considering several possible escape alternatives. In the light of that, the situation with Zilayefa in the village reveals a psychological underpinning explainable in the mental manifestation of desire and worry or challenge. Challenge confronts her at the point where she finds herself within the liminal space of identity crisis, especially the desire to identify her second half (her father) which her mother, Bibi tells her about with reservations. Bibi handles the challenge surrounding the birth of Zilayefa with care and tender never to mention a story bordering on her distant father, Plato Papadopoulos. Another painful challenge of slow violence before Zilayefa is the memory of the disorderliness of the nation, Nigeria, which results to environmental sabotage leading to the destruction of her mother's farmland.

Restless, but hopeful to embrace any prospective signal for escape, Zilayefa takes us into her feeling of “I just wanted to leave the village” (p.10) because “Inside me was my personal turmoil over Plato and outside was the turmoil of a nation” (p.109).

Similarly, writing to represent instances of dispossession and displacement, Agary places Zilayefa between two profound problems as longing for her second half, and the national issue caused by petroleum exploration and its attendant crisis of inter-village war as well as the economic hardship it imposes on the women, like Bibi, Zilayefa’s mother. It is this general concern of environmental problems that the narrator refers to as “the turmoil of a nation.” Accordingly, the turmoil becomes as complex as it cuts across political lines, economic problems, and communal war. As we see elsewhere, within the Niger Delta, the activities of the oil companies in Agrary’s *Yellow-Yellow* ignite their host communities to clash against one another over claims of who has a particular parcel of land to receive compensation and funds from the oil companies:

Communities were fighting over who legitimately owned what land after more local government areas were created, after local government boundaries were reviewed, and after local government headquarters were relocated. Due largely to the politics involved in the distribution of funds by the federal government and the oil companies in the Niger Delta, all parties believed, rightly or wrongly, that whoever owned the land controlled the local government and whatever funds it received. (p.109)

Against the political line, the turmoil of the nation intensifies during the military era when the head of state is planning for his government to transit from military to democracy. He does this with a deceptive ploy of making life a little easier for the same people his government is strangling:

Despite not having any official political opponents, the head of state's succession plan was in such high gear that, in an attempt to give this campaign an air of legitimacy, there were groups rallying in his favour. .. and there were rumours that television branded with his name would soon be in the market so that all Nigerians could afford a television set in their homes. (p.110)

However, in contrast, the narrator adds an interjectory voice to reveal the absurdity of the better life the head of state plans to make available and assessable to the citizen amid hunger and despair "Everyone would have a television set, but *garri* to eat was another matter... fares went up; the price of bread went up..." (p.110).

As we can see, there is a wide gap between political ploy, promises and reality. The Niger Delta, like the rest of the post colony is a place where political deception is always expressed in the most horrible term of "banality of power." With their antics and shenanigans, political players package deception like a commodity with a saintly colouration that shows something closer to the aspiration and yearning of the masses. The citizens remain the unsuspecting target to whom such commodity of deception and treachery is available. Therefore, setting up a programme to customise television set affordable by all is a mere gimmick to shift attention from the ongoing conflict and hardship the head of state is undeniably responsible for "People were convinced that the land's unpredictable leader was deliberately fanning the embers of ethnic conflict to shift focus from himself and his bid to succeed himself in the promised upcoming elections" (p.109).

Initiating a programme by the head of state to customise a television set for the interest of the masses is only a smoke screen as his main interest is to succeed himself in power: transiting from a military government to a democratically elected president. To this end, all the attendant issues to his political scheming include inter-tribal conflict and hardship which his subjects must contend with because:

... things were getting more and more expensive. As petrol prices went up, bus fare went up, the prices of bread went up, and school fees went up, but salaries remained the same. How could a country that exported crude oil have petrol shortage? How could a country that housed four refineries be exporting petrol when its residents were suffering without petrol? What was the minister of petroleum doing? ... there he was, sitting and feeding fat at the same table as the devils of government and oil companies and forgetting the starvation in his own home. (pp.110-111)

Similarly, what Zilayefa describes as the turmoil of the nation comes to a climax when the entire country is thrown to a point of mixed feelings – hatred and fear; hope and uncertainty for a new dawn - all being expressed the moment a news breaks about the death of an oppressive regime:

When we got to the filling station there was a guarded excitement in the air besides the regular commotion around the long queue for petrol. People were whispering in huddles. Some left their huddles laughing; some left mournful, shaking their heads as if in disbelief; some got on their knees and looked to the heavens. All that drama! (p.175)

What characterises the picture Agary paints about the attitude and action of citizens on receiving the news of the death of their head of state is the relief they assume to have from a deadly claw of a tyrant. To confirm the news the narrator tells that:

Damiete left ... and approached one of the huddles. After a few minutes, he returned to inform us that our head of state had died overnight. [The citizens could not contain their happiness over the news]... it was like a carnival in the streets. People were dancing and jubilating over the death of the

land's leader. There was no rioting,... just people celebrating the demise of a villain. (pp.175-176)

Further, the narrator leads us to see the previous secret wishes for death for the head of state expressed by the citizens who feel caged until the incident:

People breathed as they had not breathed in a long time. A divine power had acted on behalf of the people, - God, Allah, and all our spirits, had heard the collective prayers of Nigerians. That is what people were saying. (p.176)

Maier shares the same concern about the jubilation spirit of Nigerians represented by Agary when he describes the incident that leads to the death of the head of state as “a coup from heaven” (*This House has Fallen*, p.4). At this moment, the unstable situation of the country leads the narrator to describe it as the turmoil of a nation. This turmoil corresponds equally to her health challenges following her attempt at abortion. Already, Admiral has impregnated her. Therefore, her experience with local pills for abortion becomes comparably terrible with the turmoil of the country as she muses in pain “... if I lived, it was an opportunity for a personal rebirth along with Nigeria” (p.177).

The word “rebirth” as it is used in the narrative suggests a transition or change. From the context of *Yellow-Yellow*, we observe that it is the period when the nation yearns for political rebirth from military dispensation to democracy. Between the nation's collective yearning and the scheming of the tyrant to succeed himself in office from military to civilian rule, we could see the dispossession of rights of the citizenry to make political decision on who becomes their democratically elected president. True as it was with military government, the head of state stifles the yearning and aspiration of the citizenry as we learnt that every bit of his steps, including his shadow is a threat to avoid.

For Zilayefa, apart from the identity crisis, there is also the environmental problem which causes an economic challenge to her. All this accounts for her personal turmoil. At this point Agary joins other

female environmental activists and writers to decry the economic distress and pain oil companies operating in the Niger Delta have inflicted on the people, particularly the women. However, it takes the intervention of a male agent – Pastor Ikechukwu for Zilayefa to escape to Port Harcourt from the hardship in the village following the loss of her mother’s farmland to oil spillage. Significantly, the loss of her mother’s farmland represents the dispossession of both Zilayefa and her mother’s means of survival.

The pastor has written a letter to a philanthropist, Sisi, requesting her to accommodate the bearer of the message, Zilayefa, in her Port Harcourt house. Accepted by Sisi, Zilayefa finds herself in the midst of other young ladies including Lolo living together with their Matron. While in the city of Port Harcourt, the woman allows Zilayefa to discover herself, makes her choices and grows in her own pace according to her motivations. Zilayefa’s view of social events in the Niger Delta environment as they affect her starts from the village to Port Harcourt through a dominant circle of male agents and the representatives of such circle. In postcolonial environmentalist studies, the term agent is explained based primarily on the expression of intentionality and the capacity to act (Udumukwu, 2023, p. 2). Therefore, the pastor as well as others male agents act with the expression of capacity and intention that affect the life choices and decisions of Zilayefa throughout the narrative. To this end, the reader comes to terms with this circle of male agents manifesting in the light of resistance through the vandalisation of oil installations:

The young men ... The so-called youth groups had become well-oiled extortion machines all in the name of the struggle. They stole, blackmailed, and vandalised for the progress and development of the Ijaw nation, the Niger Delta. (pp.157-158)

Similarly, the oil company that owns the pipe that spills poisonous oil across the farms in the village represents the circle of male agents. It is the same with the suspected youth for sabotage:

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 (p.4).

Usually, “pipe” in petroleum economy is a galvanised conduit for transporting oil. It penetrates the earth to contact and suck in crude oil. By extension, it symbolises the movement of petroleum products. Action. In oil exploration, piping across earth lines is an engineering system of transporting drilled oil from the deposit to the depot. Agary’s imagination in the use of the word pipe defines her craft in calling attention to the knowledge of a common oil tool within the Niger Delta where oil business thrives. However, her insight into the use of the word “pipe” aesthetically evokes an attribute of the representative of the male agent particularly the phallic through which penetration is initiated. We remember that just as the pipe is buried beneath the earth or pushed to penetrate it to suck in the oil and carry it to the designated destination, the phallic is buried and rather than be left to rot in the vagina, pushes very deep to suck in and transports fluids. In this dimension, Agary’s imagination of the pipe acting in agency enlarges Ogum’s environmental animist poem, “The Stump.” From the background of the poem, we observed that the ideological orientation of the poet is anchored within the displacement of the Niger Delta ecosystem service. This awareness triggers the poet-persona to lament the “environmental angst” perpetrated in the Niger Delta by the representatives of this male agent “They penetrate deep, *very very* deep / to collect the rich black deposits in our / age-long sacred wombs. Their orgasmic / pleasure impregnates the soil with emptiness,...” (*Green Nightmares*, 2002, p.2).

Madden with disillusionment about the state of the ecosystem the poet's diction seems natural and logically systemic: "Sacred wombs," "Orgasmic/impregnates the soil" to illustrate the environmental challenge and slow violence that engulf the Niger Delta. Further, the poet-persona muses about the circle of male agents as represented by the symbolic pipe; and of more interest, by a heavier form of the pipe which the poet-persona introduces as derrick "They came from afar on fatal / contract with the erect shaft of / their derricks to dishonour our virgin soil" (p.2).

With a similar spirit of dispossession and damage to the agrarian soil, Ogun's poet-persona appeals to the public to carry his message of environmental hurt and soil defilement to the world "Tell the world all that you-know- / tell the world what our soil says-// she suffers defilement in sun's full / gaze and weeps for unaccustomed phallic thrust" (p.2).

In line with Agary's prose response to environmental decay, Ogun's poetic diction and tone delicately incite militant action to resist environmental pillage. This reconnects earlier critical observation made by Egya which points to a seemingly general outlook and logic in the culture of fictionality and representation in literature sets in the Niger Delta. According to Udumukwu, Egya describes the popular logic that defines the tone and texture of literature of the Niger Delta as primarily militant.

However, influenced by the circle of male agency from her village to Port Harcourt, Zilayefa recounts the agony of slow violence committed against the woman in the Niger Delta environment. In her village, we see signs of slow violence against womanhood expressed in the song by Robert Ebizimor: "Ere ow' ama bien mo gbein mo daba, owei mo' yaimo aki, hm hn" which according to the narrator means that we girls should throw our backsides to be picked up by the boys (p.15). The argument is that such song coming from the voice of a male

agent as singer is characterised by grotesque to suggest a sardonic attribute of the women's body. This alone makes the narrator to recoil in shame as the song affects her psychology. The mockery tone of the song on the woman hurts her innocent psyche. As a result, it becomes a slow violence that will continue to damage her feeling and the women generally even after the event.

Representing the feminist's voice of disenchantment over environmental hurt, Zilayefa's fear enlarges as she tells with a shaky voice of inter-tribal conflict waged by the male agents: "The young men were still there!" (p.157).

The exclamation, "!" reveals her emotion of fear concerning the situation in the environment. However, the narrator leads the reader all through to see that the cause of environmental degradation and the resultant condition of slow violence is the conflict amongst young men of neighbouring communities and Admiral their sponsor. This conflict is associated with the claim of ownership of land as a significant economic capital where the activities of petroleum extraction is carried out by the oil companies. Thus, we observe that the young men meet and request for money from Admiral to enable them care for their contingent at the heat of the conflict:

They needed money to pay the hospital bills of some of their friends who had been injured and money to bail out others who had been detained by the police. Admiral gave them the money but was also worried about the implication of another Ijaw/Itsekiri clash in Warri. (p.157)

Here, the point is that the Niger Delta environmental problems are being narrated in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* from the perspective of the woman. The novel represents the male agent as the major actor who carries out destruction on the ecosystem. From this side of the representation the novelist argues that all forms of slow violence that affect both human and nonhuman life forms in the ecosystem are basically man made. As a result, she represents man within the dominant culture of patriarchy as agent of environmental hurt through

the activities of petroleum extraction, conflict, politicking and war. Again, Zilayefa narrates with disgust the senselessness of conflict introduced in the Niger Delta communities by male agency:

Each time there was a clash, the Itsekiris were the first to cry foul and report in the press that the vicious, heartless Ijaws had killed hundreds of their kin. In return, the Ijaws would report that they were going about their simple fishing lives when the Itsekiri started trouble and that the Itsekiri had massacred hundreds of their own kin. Each side claimed they were the victims of the other's barbaric tendencies. So many people of mixed Ijaw and Itsekiri parentage had been killed in the conflicts. It was all just senseless. (p.157)

Equally unearthing the politics of resistance by the Niger Delta youth together with Admiral as their sponsor Zilayefa reveals more of the circle of male agents as responsible for terrorism and backwardness in the region despite their rich petroleum deposit. To understand the story from this light, the narrator tells thus:

... Admiral... was discussing politics in his living room. They talked about how the oil companies were using the Nigerian armed forces as their private security details to terrorize and sometime kill innocent villagers who questioned the inequity of their situation – living in squalor while barrels of oil pumped out of their land provided the luxury that surrounded the oil workers and the elite of Nigeria. (p.158)

Further, writing against the background of some feminist perspectives in fictional representation on the wailing condition of the Niger Delta environmental decay, Orife observes that Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* depicts the oil rich people of the Niger Delta who happen to be helplessly disappointed under the crooked hands of the multinational companies. According to her the multinational oil explorers exploit their host communities, leaving a wide range of disastrous effects of

both human and nonhuman life forms (*From Boom to Doom*, 2018, p. 170).

Agary's feminist perspective of telling the environmental story of the Niger Delta as it is blamed on the activities of the agency of patriarchy or male figures is further illustrated by Chukwumah:

... the image of the male as a seductive autocrat, [is seen in] what Abacha does with the security agencies, in that they are used as agents of terror, is what Admiral does with the Ijaw boys and, though subtly and almost going unnoticed as posing no harm. (pp.55-57)

Therefore, the novelist's representation of environmental torment through her narrative projection of the male agential figure gives description to all events and programme relating to the action of man as hindering the woman in the environment. This includes Plato Papadopoulos' action of abandoning Bibi with her pregnancy. The male figure traumatising the world continues to hurt the woman in the environment as Kamal leaves Lolo the time she needs him the most; and Sergio in the same way leaves Zilayefa unannounced. Disappointedly, she says that:

Admittedly, when I was in the village, I believed Sergio was the key to the door that would lead to a world of opportunities and dream fulfilled. However, I had been lucky in Port Harcourt. I did not need Sergio in the same way anymore. (p.170)

This paper concludes that Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* adopts an adolescent female narrator who tells of a sympathetic story of how the Niger Delta environmental decay degenerates to some forms of slow violence attributed to the forces emanating from the circle of male agency to which the woman appears to suffer more through her loss and longing for love; through her disappointment and dispossession; and above all, through her bitter experience of displacement. *Yellow-*

Yellow is a story that sings a song of environmental and emotional hurt with a rueful feminist tone that underscores slow violence.

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