



HUMAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION IN SARAH JOSEPH'S *THE VIGIL* AND KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW- YELLOW*: AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Environmental incursion has indeed become a global phenomenon, consequently its effect is on all aspect of human life. For this reason many literary works around the globe reflect the concerns of environmental degradation, salient among them are Sarah Joseph and Kaine Agary's works which provide useful hints for discussion in this article. The aim of this article is to examine human and environmental degradations in *The Vigil* by Sarah Joseph and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* from the ecofeminist perspective and with a close focus on the woman. Ecofeminist theory as used here is concerned with the well-being of humanity as well as the preservation of the natural environment which the selected novels campaign for. The theory sees a close connection between nature and the woman and argues that a depletion of nature is a dent on the woman. From the novels, the study finds that the excesses of humanity are the major causes of environmental degradation which consequently affects the lives of women and distort the peaceful existence of humanity. The article concludes therefore, that for all life forms to enjoy peaceful reality, humanity must be cautious of the developmental activities, as well as consciously preserving the natural environment.

Keywords: Human, environment, destruction, Ecofeminism, Preservation

Introduction

For many years running, ecological conscious writing around the globe continues to gain popularity and the reason is because, environmental incursion is a global phenomenon; a phenomenon which can best be described as a timing bomb that is waiting to explode and consume the whole of humanity. While this is the reality, literary scholars and authors have risen to the occasion by displaying eco-sensibility and commitment to the cause of a healthy and sustainable environment for all life forms. Further, environmental degradation and its consequence has become a topical issue occupying the time and attention of nations of the world, both developed and developing. Authors around the globe have in reaction, employed literature as a tool to warn and sensitise humanity about the dangers of human activities in the name of developmental projects, and how all life forms turn to be affected. There are works of literature that address ecological issues in Africa and other parts of the globe. Their aim is to sensitise and enlighten people about a problem and



also proffer solutions. It is therefore, not out of place that the authors in this article have taken up on ecological concerns, to make people aware of the dangers of not preserving and conserving their natural environment.

Sarah Joseph and Kaine Agary belong to different climes. While Joseph is from India, Agary hails from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In spite of such differences however, they are similar in their sensitivity and passion about environmental justice. The authors have both relied on the predicament of people, occasioned by huge environmental neglect and devastation through oil exploration and spillage, as well as deforestation and land degradation. Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil*, was published in 2014. The novel is an epic which gives primary importance to ecological aspects. In the novel, nature suffers destruction and annihilation arising from the building of a bridge which makes Angadan, the protagonist and hero of the novel to question the necessity of building the bridge. *The Vigil* is the rereading of an ancient tale inspired by the challenges thrown up by the vicissitude of contemporary life. Joseph narrates the story of a once prosperous land ruined by the political ambition of a powerful few. She reveals the damages that happens to nature as well as to its inhabitants.

Yellow-Yellow by Kaine Agary is a text that concerns with a total understanding of the relationship between the people of the Niger Delta and their environment. It is a narrative of a sad portrayal of the destruction of the place that deprives both humanity and nature of their peaceful existence, arising from the activities of oil exploration, this is in addition to the manner in which women fall victims of such environmental incursion. These are discussed in this article under the themes of degradation of place and human degradation as depicted in the novels.

The study employs ecofeminism as its theoretical framework. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism, a women movement born from the union of feminism and ecological thinkers. According to Kathryn Miles (2016: 4) ecofeminism or ecological feminism, is a relatively new variant of ecological ethics. The term is believed to be coined by the feminist, Francoise d'Eaubonne in her writing "Le Feminisme ou la mort" in 1974 She expresses the view that "there exists a direct link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. Her description focuses on the similarities or interconnectedness of the way women and nature are treated in paternalistic societies. Such a parallel between the treatment of women and nature is one of the hallmarks of ecofeminism.

Miles asserts that, ecofeminism uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders, a view of the world that respects holistic connections, and the merits of collaboration, in addition to the principle of ecology which states that the living environment as a whole should be respected and regarded as having certain basic moral and legal rights to live and flourish. To these notions, the theory pays attention to a commitment to



the environment, and an awareness of the association between women and nature. It is on the basis of Miles assertion above that ecofeminism is applied for discussion in this article. The next section discusses degradation of place in the selected novels. **Degradation of Place in the novels**

The word 'place' in the context of this article, is used to refer to a portion of space designated or available for, or being used by someone as a place of abode. Set in a village in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, *Yellow-Yellow* depicts environmental consciousness in the forms of the impact of oil exploration on the environment. The onset of the narrative of *Yellow-Yellow* is significant, as Zilayefa, the protagonist exposes the reader to the vivid picture of the predicament that the ecology in her village suffers through the incident of pollution:

... it was the first time I saw what crude oil look like. I watched as a thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path....And so it was that in a single day my mother lost her main means of sustenance.... However, I think she had lost that land a long time ago, because each season yielded less than the season before. (Yellow3-4)

The above lines by Zilayefa's showcase the level of destruction that both land and river in her village suffer as a result of the crude oil that spills all over the people's farm lands, and into their rivers, desecrating farmlands and polluting rivers. From what Zilayefa describes, the rivers and farmlands in Niger Delta dedicated to fishing and agricultural activities are progressively lost to spillages by multinational prospectors. It will not be out of place to state that environmental degradation arising from the exploitative activities of oil conglomerates has reduced the area to a 'wasteland', and in the process exacerbating the poor living standards of the already impoverished people. Agary's depiction of the degraded environment in *Yellow-Yellow* is an interrogation of man's attitude towards nature which corresponds with ecofeminist, Karen Warren's description of environmental ethics that "focuses on questions about how humans ought to treat non-human nature, also what is the nature of man's responsibility to the natural environment? When and why is man obligated to preserve wilderness areas, protect endangered species, engage in sustainable development and appropriate technology" (Warren, 1987), these issues are addressed in the novels used here.

The scenery and plot of *Yellow-Yellow* hint on the gradual corrosion and debasement of the lands in the Niger Delta over the years, which reduces farm yields annually as the land loses its fertility due to oil exploration. Besides the land being under eco-siege, the narrative portrays how creatures choke and die from "oil spill, acid rain, and gas flares..." (Yellow 4). The quantum of the backlash of these eco-unfriendly practices constitutes a huge



dislocation in the lives of all nature forms in the Niger Delta. Describing the scenario which Zilayefa points in the novel, the narrative reads:

... [T]he 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. Then there was the smell... it was strong, so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach. I bent over and retched so hard I became dizzy. It felt like everything had turned to black and was spinning around me. There was so much oil and we could do nothing with it. (Yellow4)

The excerpt is Zilayefa's great worry on the environment as enormous incursion caused by oil spillage in the name of oil drilling activities. The character's use of emphasis is reiterated in her continuous use of the words "stop" and "strong". The words elicit strong emotions from the reader. Beside the oil spreading fast all around the people's village, there is the air that is polluted and observed through the acrid smell that fills the air. The level of the destruction of the people's environment is such that it leaves them helpless. What is ironic in the people's situation is the fact that, the cause of the villagers' condition is a source of wealth for the upper class who continue to enjoy the nation's wealth. The people's woes and predicament are echoed in Zilayefa's thoughts, pains, and desires thus:

How many more times could I bear the pain like a hundred razor blade slashing my private part because the river water that washed it was the same water that received the waste rejected by my body in its attempt to cleans itself? The water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines that moved the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank. (Yellow 39)

Clearly, the above quotation highlights an environment that is polluted by oil and other human waste. The people live in an environment devoid of clean water as a result of the insensitivity of owners of the oil pipelines in allowing the oil to escape into the waters. Besides this, the land is polluted making it unsuitable for farming and habitations, as farmlands are submerged in 'thick layers of crude' and become barren from poison. Other forms of nature caught up as victims of oil spills and as seen in the narrative are plants, trees and shrubs, which should naturally enhance purity of the air in the area, but rather become imbalance in atmospheric compositions. The scenario is so because, mankind ignores the consequences of their actions because, to them, and as argued by Stephanie Lahar, (1985: 99)"the non-human environment is invisible", "man denies or at best fails to see that human survival actually



hinges on integrating with the natural environment without destroying it” as stated by eco critic,(Joseph Meeker, 1990). Similarly, Joseph’s *The Vigil* describes the huge ecological destruction that comes upon Kishkidam and surrounding cities, due to the building of Lesethu (bridge) which must be constructed in order for the army of Sugrivan and Ramanto cross over and conquer the region of Ravana and regain Sita, the wife of Raman. While building the bridge, thousands of trees, hills, and rocks are uprooted. *The Vigil* is structured around a significant question about the rationale upon which the war between Kishkidam and Rakshasas is fought, and stresses on the havoc it wreaks on the lives of people. The village of Kishkidam is once famous for its cotton, trees, and threads, but because of war and violence, that fame is destroyed. The idea presented in *The Vigil* is, while the general notion is largely that, the environment is degraded from man’s activities such as oil exploration, mining, and deforestation; the novel makes aware that, war is an act capable of huge environmental destruction, as elaborated; “...are forced to stop weaving and make weapons for the war on Lanka. The bamboo forest is decimated to make bows and arrows for the warriors”. (Vigil102)

The war fought for Sita’s sake wreaks havoc in the lives of many. Kishkidam was famous for its cotton trees and threads, all of which are more precious to them than “the throne of Ayodhya, diamonds of Lanka and horses of Kekayam, and more precious than life itself (12); a land of flowers, and trees, vegetables, fruits and grains. The city is stocked with food, and all kinds of clothes and ornaments. The people’s love for nature is demonstrated in Vali’s attitude towards nature:

have you noticed the flower gardens of Kishkidam? Is there any region without a forest? All these rare trees were planted and nurtured by Vali. He brought back seeds, saplings or cuttings from every place he visited and planted them in Kishkidam. Flowering trees, shrubs, creepers and medicinal plants. Is there any city like ours in the world? A place where a child can stretch his hands and pluck a fruit. (Vigil 25)

The people of Kishkidam regard their settlement as a peaceful haven for a lonely soul, until the intrusion by war. Besides the devastation of the natural environment, there are mighty mountains and tall trees that are brought down to build the bridge as painted in the following words:

the forest was rent with the loud laments of birds that had lost their nests, eggs and young ones. The sun was hidden. As each tree was dragged down the number of birds fleeing increased... their piercing cries rose in intensity and became unbearable as the minutes passed. The atmosphere grew even more frightening with the roars, groans and howls of animals that ran about in



fear. Angadan too threw down his axe and dashed towards the river in the forest. (Vigil235)

The novel interrogates the rationale behind violence, which uproots lives and violates nature in the name of progress leading to what may be termed 'ecoterrorism' which Tong(1986: 262) advocates that, it results from the harmful nature dichotomy that gives people power to dominate nature. Joseph shows in the novel the result of "ecoterrorism" on the environment as she depicts human domination of the non-human world. Angadan, who is a lover of nature, captures vividly the destructive nature of technology, and decides that he will rather be a coward and not axe a tree, than destroy nature to flaunt his strength; and so he says: "I love my cowardice intensely; I don't have the courage to fell this tree" (Vigil 235). The frightening kind of destruction causes Angadan to pose the question, "was there no way to prevent this war? And adds that "I am unable to accept this great destruction" (Vigil237).

In a bid to establish the idea of environmental degradation in clear terms, exaggeration is displayed in the lines drawn from the narrative; such as tears flowing from the calves as they cry for milk, elephants and horses weeping and deciding not to eat, the donkeys, horses and camels shed their hair as they neighed. Other forms of exaggerations are fruits falling off trees even before they are ripe as well as animals sensing destruction of the town of Lakan before humans could. (Vigil 222). The exaggeration exemplifies the gravity of environmental incursion that is about to come upon the community of Lakan, its people and wild life. Joseph's awareness of the environment as well as her call to preserve it also comes up in the description of bridge built across the ocean for the sake of war as she captures thus:

... if you wish to see the strength that lies in a person's hands, come to the place where the bridge is built. Witness the sight of the mountain that never bow their heads, buckle and fall before insignificant man! The forest shedding leaves, a bird journeying to another region. The trainer pointed at the bird, one of the young men from Kishkidam noisily tied his bow string and took aim and shot the arrow, which struck the bird's eyes, bringing the bird down. (Vigil 235)

The quotation above employs Poetic language; the narrative is lyrical, capturing a description of the depletion of natural elements such as forests, mountains, and birds. The devastation done to the land of Kishkidam to pave way for the construction of the bridge is frightening, a once peaceful land, rich in natural resources suffers great loss; and while the victims of war are in pain, the warmongers aided by the power of technology carryout destruction without remorse, as captured below:



The army pushed a rock down with shouts of joy. Breaking off from the top of the mountain, letting out a thunderous sound, that gigantic rock fell into the ocean with an enormous splash. So ferocious was its fall that the ocean water flew up to the skies. Stone hit stone and sparked a fire, the sight and feel, so disturbing that Angadan realised for the first time what kind of destructive strength human hands possessed. (Vigil 235)

The above quotation employs lyrical language of narration as observed in the short and song-like sentences. Angadan's feeling and reaction toward the destruction can be interpreted by ecofeminist principle as the transformation that occurs because of an intimate fellowship that man has with nature. The irony in the way nature suffers in the novel is that, technology, which should build and develop, rather becomes an instrument of destruction. Angadan questions this scenario, and his questions are valid until now when dams are constructed for larger economic purpose. Such destruction in the name of development is that which the Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, refers to as "maldevelopment" which is the imminent consequence of poverty for the environment due to the over use of technology (web). Joseph and Agary therefore, show how overuse of technology separates humanity from nature and allows human to dominate it without any sense of responsibility. The domination makes human interest more important than conservation.

Human Degradation in the novels

In *Yellow-Yellow* and *The Vigil*, it is observed that not only the place or environment is despoiled, but also there is grave danger posed to the lives of humans in the settings of the novels. Saying that the place is degraded is saying the least as the culture of the people, and their lives and life styles, are in danger of extinction. Poverty takes over the people's lives because of the loss of their livelihood and well-being. Precious Ona (2009) for instance captures the well-being of the people of the Niger Delta thus:

For the Niger Delta... environmental sustainability is fundamental to their over-all well-being and development. The environment is important... not only because of their existence, to a large extent, relies on substantial endeavours which depends on natural resources, but also they perceive that their well-being is tied to their environment in terms of livelihood, health, vulnerability and the ability to control their lives.... (40)

Ona's argues that the victimisation of nature equals to the dislocation of the lives of the people. In the New World Order, environmental activists like the Green Peace and Friends of the Earth have warned of the direct linkage between environmental degradation and poverty, particularly in



developing nations. The pervasive threat of global warming and climate change is a consequence of the destruction of the environment, especially from oil exploration. As established by Corp Watch, an organisation that works to hold corporations accountable on issues of environmental injustice. The life style of the people changes as they are suddenly faced with a different and unprepared style of living. The image of fear, inner torture, and destabilisation come through as the experience of the people is narrated.

Degradation reflects in the youths' new lifestyle and degenerate value system in According to Agary, such deals in part with "growing up in the Niger Delta and trying to come to terms with... the perception of society ... (Yellow200). In addition is the fact that, a conscious or an unconscious erosion of the human mind is an attack on the human dignity, which is a significant issue in the Niger. While this is so, there is also a destabilisation in the culture that produces idle minds which Zilayefa recounts in the novel, "so boys wandered about the village aimlessly, dropping the phrase "Aluta continua" at the slightest provocation. As for the girls, they drop out to have their babies or as my mother would say, to turn 'ofogorious' with the jobless boys in town" (Yellow34). Perfectly inferred from *Yellow-Yellow* is that, in the state of confusion that ensues from the devastation, the youths are left in utter neglect.

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* describes in vivid terms, the manner in which women are affected at different levels when nature is degraded. As the thematic trajectory of the narrative bear imprint of events in the author's socio-cultural and political environment, it demonstrates the consequences of oil exploration on the Niger Delta woman, especially her marginalisation and subjugation. Chapter Two of *Yellow-Yellow* tells the pathetic story of the innocent girl, Bibi, whose life becomes a metaphor for degradation of primal innocence. Bibi is introduced in the novel as a young and naive eighteen-year-old, who has just moved to Port Harcourt from her small village .Like every innocent and unguarded girl, she succumbs to the ravaging power and corruption of the western world, personified by the character of the Greek sailor, Plato Papadopoulos.

Besides, women and girls are forced to migrate into cities as the activities of the oil companies render the rural areas uninhabitable due to a contamination of their lands and water. The females are desperate about migrating, not minding what they face in the cities as long as they move out of the environment they consider as choking and frustrating. The reader sees deeper into the scenario as Zilayefa reveals that, "I was open to all sorts of things. The only portion I was unwilling to consider, which tormented my quiet moments the most, was to remain in my village" (Yellow39). In spite of the fear of the unknown, the females in Zilayefa's village are eager to migrate as long as they leave the village. Such desperation can only be a revelation of the level of devastation meted on the village by oil explorers. Zilayefa's words brings this to the fore "I was afraid to leave the



comfort of all that I had known for seventeen years to start a new life ...nevertheless, the desire to start a new life far outweighed any fears I had” (Yellow41).

Women in the Niger Delta region take on attitude like Zilayefa’s because, considering the near meaninglessness of life that stares them daily, they are convinced that there certainly has to be a “better future” (Yellow42) outside their vicinity. Unfortunately, however, this better future as portrayed in the novel does not turn out as expected especially in the case of Zilayefa who faces another round of degradation in the city by getting pregnant instead of getting education. Such scenarios undoubtedly affirm and attest to the idea that, environmental degradation leads to gender-based exploitation.

Besides the effect on the woman, one observes other forms of human degradation in *The Vigil*. Hectares of land belonging to the people are destroyed because of war and the construction of a bridge, causing the people to be uprooted from their original habitat. They are forcibly displaced to some unknown location to rebuild their lives thereby, becoming refugees. All these are happening in the name of civilisation and progress but the question asked in the novel is ‘for whom?’ In the text, the destruction of the natural environment and the construction of the bridge serve nothing but war, which causes annihilation. Further, is the manner in which the destruction affects the livelihood of the people as their source of food is affected. The narrative brings the reality to the fore thus:

banana groves that flowered bore fruits that matured and turned ripe, always bearing signs of plenty. They looked as though a herd of elephants had romped through them. Where else can they go to provide food for so many people? Surgrivan ordered that the best of fruits, the choicest vegetables, and grains should be reserved for the army. Women and children should practice eating less. Give up the habit of eating rice, corn and sesame seed. Send all the seeds to the soldiers. Of the leaves and tubers, take only what remains after the army has been fed. Having met the requirements of the army, Kishkidam suffered an unprecedented famine. (Vigil192)

The people are plunged into famine as the depletion of their environment affects their ability to feed as they used to. What is ironical in this situation is that the same army that is responsible for their condition are preferred and placed first when it comes to distribution of food since the food is not sufficient. Women and children are the worst hit as it is always the case when nature is trampled upon. The people of Kishkidam face an experience that is alien to them. The region of Lanka suffers insecurity because of environmental



hazard. Lanka is a region that is well fortified by nature elements, the narrative illustrates that:

it is protected by four forts-the water fort, the mountain fort, the forest fort and the secret fort. All are awe inspiring, unreachable and perilous. It stands on the summit of the Trikuta Mountain, which is surrounded by the deep ocean. No one can enter the Trikuta forest or conquer the mountain. There are no known paths to that Lanka, no ship routes. (Vigil 198)

In spite of such admirable security apparatus that the region of Lanka enjoys, Raman's every order and action for the larger purpose of Sita's rescue becomes an intrusion into nature as well as to its inhabitants. Elements of nature such as trees constitute raw materials for the people's building and construction of their furniture. The sandalwood described as amazing in size and age, and is commonly found in the dense forest of the sandalwood for instance, is one, which is used to build the bedroom of Raman's father. In addition are decorations and carvings using the sandalwood: "on the ceiling were carved creepers, flowers and little birds. The sandalwood wall was decorated with figures of the sun, moon and stars. Above the threshold were heads of she-elephants, tuckers and horses. Frangranced with the scent of sandalwood (Vigil204). Maruthi's description of the sandalwood reveals how the tree is a treasure to the people, and reveals the great havoc that destroying it brings upon them in terms of disarming them of raw material for constructions of various kinds (Vigil206).

The above quotation exemplifies the joy and fun that the people derive from all that the sandalwood tree offers them. It is observed from the narrative that; the sandalwood tree is a part of the people's culture. It is a part of their marriage and worship system. It is also used for decoration and beautification. However, in spite of all the wonder and greatness of the tree, Raman and Sugrivan's pay little or no attention to the protection of nature and the people, their craving is rather for power and superiority in addition to political ambition. In the name of constructing a bridge, the environment is destroyed and people are uprooted from their original habitats. They are forcibly displaced to some unknown locations to rebuild their lives, thereby, turning the people into refugees. In rebuilding their lives, they loss their culture and lifestyle, their wealth and land is also lost, their whole life is distorted, and their security may not be guaranteed. Because of the depletion of their environment, the people of Rakshasas migrate from Lanka, a land once rich in natural resources and wealth, to become refugees in the region of Padmavanam. For instance, while they approach the forest, they encounter the army and quickly, one of them voiced out saying, 'I seek protection' requesting permission to alight on the shore, the man said 'I am a refugee' 'I am a refugee from Lanka' (Vigil216) he repeated. As refugees, the people are



subjected to the host community; they become weak, slave-like, and live in fear always.

Conclusion

Taken overall, Agary and Joseph present human and non-human nature in their novels as victims of environmental degradation; some of these are degradation of the ecology, people's cultural values; degradation of the natural innocence; degradation of the psyche as well as intellect of the youth; and the degradation of socio-economic cultures of the place. All of which are perceived through the overturning and supplanting of their people's means of livelihood. In Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* the woman is depicted as a victim of environmental degradation, she is helpless and as a result, she resorts to doing anything just to survive the difficulty of a distorted environment. In both novels, nature in the form of land, river and creatures are seen to suffer huge destruction in all ramifications. Characters, incidents and events create consciousness of modern ecological dangers in each of the novel. Therefore, for all life forms to enjoy peaceful reality, humanity must be cautious of the developmental activities as well as consciously preserving the natural environment.

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