

## WOMEN AND EXTRACTIVISM IN KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW*: A POSTCOLONIAL ECOFEMINIST CRITIQUE

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### Abstract

This article aims to examine the exploitation of women in Kaine Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* (2006). The novel has been analyzed from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective. The postcolonial ecofeminist analysis of this novel reveals the exploitative type of relationship between women and extractivism, which can manifest the destruction of nature through the over-extraction of crude oil by transnational corporations. In this manner, Bibaebi, the major female character, is oppressed by the oil extraction process, dispossessed of her farmland, and faced with displacement and illicit migration. The study also reveals that though women are the brunt of persistent oppression, women's interconnectedness to nature is a pathway to survival and resilience. Bibaebi and her daughter, Zilayefa, form a core of resistance against the petro-capitalist exploitation of nature. Ultimately, this study situates women within the broader discourse of neocolonial extractivism, underscoring the pressing need to reevaluate the intersection of women and nature in contemporary African literature.

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to conduct a postcolonial ecofeminist analysis of Kaine Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* (2006). Kaine Agary, a noted female writer in Nigeria, is well known for her debut novel, *Yellow-Yellow*, which is her most influential, widely read, and critically acclaimed work. The novel explores the intersections of gender, culture, and environmental issues within the context of postcolonial Nigeria. By examining the lives of its female characters, Agary highlights the unique challenges they face, illustrating how their struggles are deeply intertwined with the socio-political landscape of their country. This novel addresses various issues, including corruption, poverty, masculinity, militarism, and sexualization, primarily related to the major female characters, Bibaebi and her daughter, Zilayefa. Based on these themes, research works have been conducted on this novel. However, this research tries to examine how women are being violated, dominated, and overexploited in the process of exploration, production, and distribution of crude oil by multinational oil-extracting companies portrayed in the novel.

Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* is also labeled as a genre of oil fiction. The concept of oil fiction was first introduced by Amitav Ghosh (Balkan & Nandi, 2021) to refer to the pervasive impact of oil on society, culture, and the economy. Along with the growing concern for climate change, oil fiction proliferated in the 2000s and 2010s, as writers believed that literature should respond to climate crises. Thus, writers have become actors writing petro-stories at various levels. As a genre, oil fiction focuses on issues including the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, gender issues, petro violence, migration, and war in Global South Africa (Feldner, 2018; Randriamaro, 2019).

The researcher found that the novel *Yellow-Yellow* has been analyzed from other critical perspectives. However, postcolonial ecofeminist analysis of this novel remains unstudied. Some of the research works conducted on the novel, which were informed by other theories, can be found online. The first work is Egya's (2018) "*Sexualized Body, Exploited Environment: A Feminist Ecocritical Reading of Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow and Christy Watson's Tiny Sunbirds Far Away.*" Egya, in his work, explored the predicament of women in the wake of oil exploration. In this analysis, Egya focuses on the impact of oil exploitation on women's reproductive health. The toxic environment created by overexploitation is also a manifestation of the various ways of oppression of women. The article also examines the subjugation of women based on class, gender, race, religion, location, colonialism, and neocolonialism.

Adeyemo and Shittu's (2021) article, entitled "*The Damaged Woman in the Damaged Environment: An Ecofeminist Critique of Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow (2006),*" is another

research work reviewed to identify the gap for the present research. Drawing on ecofeminist theory, Adeyemo and Shittu examined Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* through an ecofeminist lens, demonstrating that women's unhealthy relationships are often geared towards the oppression of women and the environment.

Onsomsakulkij's (2018) *World of Agency Revisited: Representation of Environmental Ethics for the Niger Delta in Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow* (2018) is also the research article reviewed in-depth. In this study, Onsomsakulkij investigated the role of agency as a tool for empowering female human protagonists against the forces of oil exploitation. Thus, the paper focuses on the representation of women's agency. It also explores environmental ethics through an interconnected bond between multiple agents, including women and the natural world. Onsomsakulkij suggests that environmental literature could be used to inspire environmental conservation.

Chukwumah's article "The Displaced Male-Image in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*" (2017) was reviewed in depth. Chukwumah, in this article, explores the deprivation of the protagonist's subsistence livelihood due to oil despoliation. However, this assertion is made without much regard to the repressed and manifest anxieties and desires profoundly induced in the novel's major female characters. It investigated the provocations, corollaries, and correlations of the displaced male image through its absence and presence. Characters' heeding of some pleasure code, the super-structural image of the male person hangs, and unseen shadows have been explored.

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is a seminal work of oil fiction that lays a foundation for postcolonial ecofeminist theory and practice. The novel appears as a gateway to access the subjugation of women through the overexploitation of crude oil. Additionally, literary criticism was employed to examine fiction that critiques society's dependence on a petroleum-based economy and the related culture it fosters (Balkan and Nandi, 2021).

Therefore, this article intends to explore the oppression and domination of female characters by the over-extraction of oil companies in Kaine Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow*. It employs a postcolonial ecofeminist literary lens to analyze the novel. The study primarily examines the entanglements and interconnections of female characters with the environment being destroyed by oil company activities in the novel.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This article analyzes Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* from the perspective of postcolonial ecofeminism. Postcolonial ecofeminism is a critical theory that evaluates the relationship between women and nature in postcolonial contexts. It argues that women in postcolonial societies are subjected to both colonial and patriarchal oppression. This can manifest in the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. Concepts such as colonial exploitation of women, patriarchy, displacement and loss, resistance, and the destruction of nature are significant.

Postcolonial ecofeminism critically examines the complex relationship between women, gender, and the environment (Brazal, 2021; Chae, 2015; Jabeen, 2020). For clarity, in the words of Campbell (2008) and Mohanty (1984), postcolonial ecofeminism—a convergence of postcolonialism and ecofeminism—has emerged as a popular theoretical lens for examining the relationships between women and nature in postcolonial contexts. Both postcolonialism and ecofeminism theories individually lack addressing environmental issues and the universal history of postcolonialism concerning the women-nature connection in the Global South (Chae, 2015; Jabeen, 2020). This means that postcolonialism is inconsiderate of the issue of women concerning nature, while ecofeminism, still a Western construct, does not cater to the impacts of colonialism on women of the former colonized countries (Agarwal, 1992; Chae, 2015; Jabeen, 2020).

In light of the above notion, Agarwal (1992) and Mohanty (1984) make a philosophical submission to reject ecofeminism, for it does not address the material realities of women in third-world countries. According to Jabeen (2020), women-nature exploitation is based on the “twin oppression of women and nature” (Jabeen, 2020, p. 1). Jabeen also argues that feminizing nature and naturalizing women is not just an issue affecting women, but suggests ways to examine the complex relationships between women and nature by studying the impact of colonial practices on both nature and women. Thus, combining the two theories to bring the issue of women and nature as impacted by neocolonial capitalist domination is the concern of this study.

Postcolonial ecofeminists challenge traditional ecofeminist perspectives by emphasizing the need to consider the historical and cultural contexts of formerly colonized societies. They critique Western ecofeminism for often generalizing women's experiences without recognizing the specific challenges faced by women of color and those from Indigenous communities.

Postcolonial ecofeminism interrogates the oppression of women and nature. It revitalizes women's drives to protect nature from neocolonial exploitation by creating multidimensional

survival strategies that promote sustainability and resilience. In this regard, Agarwal (1992) and Chae (2015) propose ways to conserve nature by strengthening the connections between women and the natural world. Jabeen (2020) emphasizes the essence of postcolonial ecofeminist scholarship in the study and reassessment of women-nature connections, which later advance the development of postcolonial ecofeminist multispecies methodologies and contribute to the creation of a sustainable world.

Significantly, postcolonial ecofeminism seeks justice for women and nature by examining how both are interconnected, reflected, and affect each other (Mohanty, 1984; Rahman, 2019). Thus, its inclusiveness offers ways of making sense of the postcolonial world and a connected practice of living, challenging the subjugation of women and nature. It also provides perspectives to examine typically overlooked and marginalized women and nature in Africa. As a practical policy and development approach, postcolonial ecofeminism contributes to discussions about social justice and environmental ethics by exposing the intertwined nature of women's oppression and ecological destruction. It argues that effective solutions to environmental crises must also address systemic inequalities related to class and gender.

Kaur (2012) and Randriamaro (2019) further add that women in Africa are faced not only with traditional patriarchy at home but also with the neocolonial exploitation of nature on the continent. Still, others argue that the Western-based theory of ecofeminism overlooks the re-examination of the oppression of both women and nature. In Kaur's (2012) views, the study of African literature written by African writers has so far lacked the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature because of colonial resource extraction. In light of this issue, Altin (2022) notes that African literary scholars argue that the study of women's oppression concerning nature, incorporating female-authored texts, can be seen as a sign of progress in the examination of human-nonhuman interactions and entanglements in African literature. The uniqueness of the African situation provides a fertile ground for critical analysis of texts authored by African female writers from fresh perspectives. One of the themes oil fictions reflect is extractivism.

A significant issue in the neocolonial world is extractivism. Scholars give definitions to extractivism. Crittenden (2000) and Acosta (2017), for example, define extractivism as a process of exploiting, producing, and accumulating wealth through the extraction of natural resources, especially crude oil. The historical origin of extractivism and its guises may vary. However, since the late 19th century, extractivism has been structured as a hegemony of European powers "tied up with transnational capital" (Barcia, 2017, p. 67). The logic of extractivism is to remove large volumes of non-processed crude oil for capital accumulation at

the expense of others. The process of extraction has a disproportional impact on women and other vulnerable groups (Acosta, 2017).

Scholars also examined the impact of extractivism on women. Klein (2014) sees extractivism as a form of “dominance-based relationship with the earth” (Klein, 2014, p. 169). Extractivism is a mode of economic activity that serves as a source of capital accumulation for men and capitalists, while denying women and placing them on the frontline of its impacts (Acosta, 2017; Barcia, 2017; Crittenden, 2000). Following global trade and network expansion, extractive activities have intensified the plundering of resources to benefit the centers of global markets at the cost of nature and people experiencing poverty. This extractive violence inflicts harm on women by damaging nature and relegating them to lower social ranks, poverty, and urban migration.

Regarding the history of extractivism in Africa, writers associate it with the expansion of colonialism. Since then, oil extraction activities on the continent have had a disproportionately negative impact on women in various ways (Feldner, 2018; Randriamaro, 2019). Its manifestations have ruined women’s livelihoods and existence by appropriating their natural environment (Greco, 2020; Randriamaro, 2019). As a source of hazards and toxicities, oil extraction exposes women to the destruction of their small businesses and homes, incrimination of prostitution, commercial sex work, extreme poverty, and illegal migration (Greco, 2020). Thus, the oil extraction process in postcolonial Africa is regarded as a destructive force to both women and nature. This has resulted in continuous marginalization and victimization of women due to the loss of their natural resources there, with no consent and compensation for the damages made by colonial powers (Macgregor, 2006).

However, in challenging extractivism, African women have been engaged in environmental struggles for ages, dating back to the days of colonialism (Sheoran, 2017; Stratton, 2020). Women writers and scholars on the continent have attempted to depict the representation of these hardships, aiming to restore their historic status in society and their connection to the natural environment. Women have resisted the destruction of nature caused by colonial over-exploitation. In this case, Wangari Maathai, who depicts environmental destruction and its effects on indigenous populations of women, particularly by establishing an environmental campaign called *the Green Belt Movement* (Maathai, 2003), is the most influential one.

Another strategy to challenge neocolonial environmental destruction is through being inherently connected to nature. In this regard, Starhawk (2004) argues that the connection between women and nature in Africa has existed since colonial times. Thus, the long-lasting

bond that exists between women and nature is to satisfy women's material conditions. Through their spiritual bond with nature, women thus resist the overexploitation of nature to meet the diverse material needs, sustain their livelihoods, and foster spiritual connections, all while promoting sustainability. Similarly, Macgregor (2006) and Martinez-Alier (2002) argue that women are key stakeholders in farming, natural resource production, and management, as well as in household consumption, in Africa.

## **METHOD**

This study primarily employs the qualitative content analysis research method. It applies the theoretical concepts of postcolonial ecofeminism in its analysis. Content analysis, according to Frey et al. (2000), is a research method used to identify, enumerate, and analyze occurrences of specific messages and message characteristics embedded in texts. This literary study, employing qualitative content analysis, aims to examine the meanings associated with messages as they appear in Kaine Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow*. Therefore, the nature of the present study makes this qualitative content analysis method an appropriate choice.

The novel was selected because it is written by an African female writer whose perceptions on issues such as the colonization of nature and the extraction of natural resources resulted in persistent oppression of women, children, and the natural environment. To analyze the novel through a postcolonial ecofeminist lens, specific procedures are employed. These procedures involve examining the text for themes related to colonization, environmental degradation, and gender oppression, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these interconnected issues are portrayed. By employing this analytical framework, the study aims to highlight the unique perspectives that emerge from Agary's work. The first procedure applied for analysis was to read the selected novel closely. Close reading is essential because literature often carries multiple meanings and lends itself to various interpretations. This helped identify the relevant passages that illustrate relationships between women and nature. Through close reading, relevant extracts were thus selected for analysis and interpretation. Also, to write the review of related literature and theoretical framework for the study, journal articles and experimental books were consulted. Finally, the extracts drawn from the novel were analyzed and interpreted from the postcolonial ecofeminist perspective.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Petrocapitalist Exploitation of Women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* portrays the persistent subjugation of women in myriad ways. Under the aegis of building a world of petroculturalism, the activities of transnational oil-extracting companies caused the perpetuation of the injustices made to women. In the novel, Bibaebi, the major character, is a poor rural woman farmer who experiences multiple injustices. The oil extraction process generates extreme violence that perpetrates "oil spills, land, and gas flaring that have inflicted the farming lands" (Agary, 2006, p. 80) of Bibaebi, her daughter Zilayefa, and other women, depriving them of the right to live. Here, the ideology of petroculturalism appears to accumulate wealth through the exploitation of oil by legitimizing the oppression of women through the destruction of nature. Bibaebi, who lives near the oil extraction project site, has been affected by the various problems arising from the oil extraction activities. The loss of her farming land subjects her to structural violence. Zilayefa, the narrator and daughter of Bibaebi, witnesses how "the oil pollution destroys [her] mother's land, her main source of sustenance, resulting in impoverishment" (Agary, 2006, p. 4). Due to massive destruction, the farming land has been transformed into a poverty-stricken area that prevails in the village, forcing Zilayefa, her mother, and other women to live in a "den of poverty, hunger, filth, and polluted water" (Agary, 2006, p. 23). It also alienates women, who are often regarded as "good caregivers and stewards of nature" (Stratton, 2020, p. 2), from the farming lands on which they rely for their material needs. Exploiting the "crude-oil-polluted barren land and waters" (Agary, 2006, p. 23) unraveled the situation of women farmers by turning their farming land into scorched and useless land for growing crops for food.

The destruction of farmlands affects women as they depend on them for their livelihood. When extraction impacts nature, Gies (2015) argues that "women are on the frontline of its impacts" (p. 23). Thus, extractivism, a repressive global economic model, subdues Bibaebi and other women farmers to environmental damage, pollution, and social outrage. While indigenous women's survival remains uncertain, the oil companies enjoy privilege, making a profit at the cost of others. Zilayefa hereby narrates her first experience of seeing the explosion of the crude oil and its rampant intensification continued plaguing her community's farmlands by arguing that:

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. The once fertile soil turned into a wasteland, and the crops we relied on for sustenance withered away. It was not just the loss of food; it was the destruction of our way of life, leaving us to grapple with the

long-term consequences of corporate negligence. I ran to my mother's farm. It was the first time I saw what crude oil looked like. It just kept spreading, and I wondered if it would stop, when it would stop, and how far it would spread (Agary, 2006, p. 3).

This allows oil companies to establish territorial and epistemological hegemony over the lands of women. The hegemony of transnational oil extraction companies over indigenous women and their land has deprived them of the ability to live there. Zilayefa recounts how the fast spread of oil on the land's surface is covered nonstop with countless natural disasters. The oil remains "viscous that could not dry out; black oil that was knee-deep (Agary, 2006, p. 4) and complicates women's lives by aggravating health-detrimental effects. The description of the land as being covered by spilled crude oil may signify the literal process of inscription on women's farmland. The despoliation of the land's surface extends to widening gender inequalities by destroying women's farmlands, which help them feed their families and children.

The oil flare on the surface of the water generates toxicities, polluting the water, air, and soils. This implies the death of the ecosystem. The adulteration of water and the aquatic ecosystem brings hazardous health impacts on women. Zilayefa says, "Then there was the smell. I can't describe it, but it was so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach. I became dizzy and I felt like everything had turned to black and was spinning around me" (Agary, 2006, p. 4).

The crude oil's overflow and spills on the surface of rivers cause acid rain, which contains toxic substances. This also highlights the impending climate crisis. In doing so, not only are women and children harmed, but also the flora and fauna of the area. The holistic impact of the oil extraction activity led to animal species becoming subjected to submersion and death, as Zilayefa observes, "I watched the crude oil as a thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path" (Agary, 2006, p. 4). Animals become decimated to death while "fish and other forms of aquatic life float dead on poisoned oily rivers" (Agary, 2006, p. 28), ruining women's existential rights by damaging the aquatic ecology. Fishing and farming become difficult for women to practice. This brings women to be poor enough to feed themselves and their families.

The oil companies are granted the right to exploit oil resources as they "seem licensed to abuse it" (Agary, 2006, p. 91). Zilayefa sees these companies as disruptive agents. She also condemns her biological Greek father, who represents the white capitalist, for "he was just gone, leaving his planted seed in my mother's belly" (Agary, 2006, p. 3). Later, realizing her white father, who has done nothing to her and her mother but left them hopeless, Zilayefa

perceives that white male colonizers' role is invading African resources and producing helpless women and children by arguing that "entry by sea into the African coast to ensnare local women" (Agary, 2006, p. 98). Agary critiques the coming of "whites to African soils for resource butchering" (Agary, 2006, p. 125) and oppresses women by their environmental perils. To recapitulate, the neocapitalist oil drilling practices perpetuate the hardships for women, alienating them through the extinction of nature.

### **Ecocide, Violation of Nature and Women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow***

Nature has been violated and, in turn, affected women and other vulnerable groups. This has occurred due to the extinction of nature resulting from ecocidal activities by transnational companies. The term 'ecocide' combines 'eco' for 'ecosystem' (rooted in 'oikos' for 'home') and 'cide' for 'killing or cutting down' and was coined by Arthur Galston to refer to the extinction of flora and fauna (Castree et al., 2019; Eichler, 2020; Halder, 2022). Eichler (2020) demonstrates how the arrival of explorers and colonizers in indigenous communities altered the natural ecosystem, including nonhuman animals, farming lands, and water bodies. Likewise, ecocide in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is well depicted as a destructive force, demolishing the lives of women and their children as a result of oil drilling activities. Zilayefa witnesses the destructive nature of ecocide on her mother's land by saying that "farming and fishing, the occupations that had sustained my mother, her mother, and her mother's mother, no longer provided gain" (Agary, 2006, p. 40).

According to Obi (2005), women in Africa have been acutely victimized by the massive destruction of nature as a result of the presence of foreign capital on the continent. The (un)intentional depletion of nature, which Eichler (2020) distinguishes as 'ecological genocide,' excludes women from the positive impacts of development. This has resulted in starving women turning their subsistence farms into barren land that no longer grows crops or fish to feed their families. As imagined, life in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is dead, and this is manifested as a complete biodiversity loss, which, according to Halder (2022), is referred to as petroviolece—a form of violence committed by crude oil extraction activities. The extensive destruction of nature to maximize profit made "women rowed their canoes farther and farther away to find land" (Agary, 2006, p. 41), which "is a critical resource to their survival" (Obi, 2005, p. 6).

The oil companies' ecocidal activities have brought about a climate crisis, too. Agary illustrates that Zilayefa "had witnessed lands claimed by massive floods during the rainy season, the earth slowly melting into rivers" (Agary, 2006, p. 40). Irregular rain and extreme

flooding occur. This harms women as they are exposed to various climate vulnerabilities. The ecocide inflicted on nature by the transnational oil corporations hinders women's capacity to function as independent agents. Such a form of ecocide, as Crosby (1986) states, inflicts nature first and impacts the poor masses, particularly women and children. Agary challenges the hazardous situations faced by women due to oil drilling practices. These practices bring contamination that perpetuates pollution in various forms, as "the water flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines (Agary, 2006, p.39).

Water contamination has exacerbated the issue, fully underscoring the consequences of river pollution, acid rain, and the gradual extinction of nature. The ecocide perpetuated by the activities of oil companies is meant to butcher the local ecologies. Greco (2020) sees transnational companies as agents that have been privileged to illegally loot the resources of postcolonial states since the days of colonialism. All these implicate the gradual destruction of nature (Nixon, 2011), who refers to this silent killing as 'slow violence.' Because of this unmanaged human interference with nature, Nixon argues, those who are vulnerable have become victims of 'slow violence.' The indigenous women in Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* have experienced being denied their natural right to live and becoming powerless as a result of the destruction of their farming land.

Nixon's slow violence in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* exists in two ways. Firstly, a continuous loss of biodiversity and destruction of nature have been observed through the ecocidal activities of oil companies since they entered the area. Agary records the experience of the ecological despoilments made on women and nature: "the spillage destroys farmlands as well as the aquatic life of the people, thereby causing villagers to lose their source of livelihood" (Agary, 2006, p. 3). Zilayefa captures that "like the way she and others in the village had gradually lost, year after year, the creations of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares" (Agary, 2006, p. 4). The cyclical year-to-year ecological depletion indicates the loss of biodiversity. The pollution of rivers, water streams, and the natural ecosystem reflects the degradation of the natural environment. That means the destruction of the ecosystem by oil companies yields a poisonous environment, polluting water bodies and the air, and creating a dysfunctional ecosystem. The loss of rivers has a significant economic impact on women; Zilayefa says, "Every year it was difficult to catch fish" (Agary, 2006, p. 4). This represents the slow violence of the oil extraction process, which Nixon defines as the "slow violence of delayed destruction" (Nixon, 2011, p. 23). The incidents of oil spills and disruptions to aquatic life have a provisional economic impact on women.

On the other hand, a significant gradual decline in agricultural productivity is observed in the novel. The change made in the natural ecosystem would contribute to the loss of these agricultural products. Zilayefa's mother's farm has seen less and less productivity "because each season yielded less than the season before" (Agary, 2006, p.39). This makes it impossible for women to grow enough crops to feed their families. Nixon (2011) argues that those indigenous people lacking resources become "the principal casualties of slow violence" (p. 4). The narrator tells us that during her secondary school days, pipelines that ran through her village broke and spilled oil over the farming lands of her mother and other women farmers. This renders women landless, so they are no longer able to produce their own food. According to Nixon (2011), such a kind of ecological violence is linked with the day-to-day experiences of the indigenous inhabitants.

### **Destruction of Nature and Migration of Women**

*Yellow-Yellow* also reportedly chronicles the journey of female characters from an oil-ravaged Ijaw village to distant cities, due to the hardships inflicted on their farmlands. The novel narrates that after Zilayefa's mother's farmland had been damaged and had become useless to grow crops, Zilayefa was forced "to migrate to Port Harcourt" (Agary, 2006, p. 105), a city several miles away from Ijaw, to serve herself and help her poor mother. However, no sooner did she arrive in the city than she faced a pregnancy with Admiral, a retired military officer, and one old enough to be her father. Thereby, Zilayefa experiences psychological, moral, and spiritual disillusionment. Unfortunately, her marriage has also ended in failure. Upon the birth of her child, Zilayefa is traumatized by the dilemma for a long time and then regrettably decides to "abortion as the only solution" (Agary, 2006, p.69) to make her free from the dilemma. Haunted by her traumatized past, Zilayefa decides to escape the boredom of her destroyed village for Port Harcourt, where she is confronted with "sexual abuse and racial discrimination" (Agary, 2006, p. 3).

Initially, Zilayefa decides to move anywhere outside of her damaged village, as she says, "I simply wanted a way out of the village" (Agary, 2006, p. 23). Then, sharing her thoughts about life there, just like her country's girls do, she decides to move to Port Harcourt, with no idea of means of survival but to do whatever she does with the rich people of different colors, ages, and sizes for "our oil money" (Agary, 2006, p.38) or working in "prostitution and street living, both of which are marked by high levels of violence" (Agary, 2006, p.96). These places, in turn, expose Zilayefa to gender-based violence and various subjugations, including working in "commercial sex works" (Agary, 2006, p. 100).

The novel offers triggering factors that propel Zilayefa to migrate to the city of Port Harcourt. One of the factors is the destruction of her mother's farm, which impedes Zilayefa's mother from educating her child. Upon completing her secondary education, Zilayefa was unable to pursue her university education. Zilayefa says, "By the time I finished school, my mother did not have enough money for university. I could not even take the qualifying examinations because she did not have the registration fee" (Agary, 2006, pp. 10-11). Zilayefa continues to tell us that "the black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unraveled the threads that held together her fantasies for me" (Agary, 2006, p. 10). The encroachment of Zilayefa's mother's cropland by oil extraction activities dries up her hope of being able to grow and support her child's education. Here, the "thread" may symbolize the connection between women and soil that always enables women to grow crops for food. Zilayefa laments that "the day [her] mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil, the day her dream for [her] started to wither" (Agary, 2006, p. 10). Though she was spurred by her mother, who believes in education as 'a passport' used for women's social and economic elevation, and her friend Sisi, who encourages her "to have a degree (Agary, 2006, p. 69), the destruction of her village, economic dispossessions, and injustices made by oil extraction companies propel Zilayefa to illegal migration.

Another factor is the collusion of local leaders with oil company owners. Local corrupt leaders who enjoy profits from oil and the expatriates abandon indigenous women, who bear the brunt of oil exploitation and "repressions by the state" (Obi, 2005, p. 6), which causes women to be psychologically wounded and morally despairing. Zilayefa confirms that "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" (Agary, 2006, p.39). Local men leaders, who suck resources aligning with owners of oil companies, are engaged in leveraging their maximal benefits by destroying women's means of livelihood. Zilayefa blames "more and more of ... African profits, born-throwaways, ashawo-pickins, father-unknowns, running around the slums of Port Harcourt" (Agary, 2006, p.171) for they did not attend to the problems of her mother and others in her victim community.

### **Women's Connectedness to Nature in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow***

From another perspective, Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* demonstrates the interconnections and interdependencies between women and nature. Research shows that though women bear the brunt of extractive violence and patriarchy, women in Africa have remained an integral part of nature since precolonial times (Macgregor, 2006; Martinez-Alier, 2002). However, the

arrival of colonization in Africa undermines the relationships between women and nature (MacGregor, 2006). Agary recollects the precolonial time as “filled with utopian memories” (Agary, 2006, p. 33), when humans and nonhuman women and children rejuvenated in reciprocity. She also reminds the readers that “Ijaw women cooked a fresh pot of soup every day because the rivers were teeming with fish, their farms held plantain trees so fertile that there was more plantain than anyone” (Agary, 2006, p. 40).

In the novel, Agary’s female characters build a bond with nature to ensure their existence. Hence, the material connection to nature brings women to resist extractive violence (Smith, 2003). To shield and educate her daughter, Bibaebi, for example, is inherently connected to nature by forming a core of resistance to the exploitative practices of oil corporations and the state’s leadership. Agary narrates that “Bibaebi is silent, motherhood but bears on challenges” (Agary, 2006, p. 80). This form of existence interrogates power-based resilience to dismantle petrocapiatist assumptions deeply rooted in violent structures and economic inequalities. The resistance by Bibaebi, however, seems challenging as she is afflicted by both the destruction of her farm and the patriarchy structured in her society.

Bibaebi’s resistance through being calm can be a means of confronting persistent (post)colonial repression in Africa. MacGregor (2006) and Martinez-Alier (2002) explain that in many African societies, where agriculture is the backbone of the economy, women are the primary harvesters and producers of food for their families to eat. Thus, women, like their male counterparts, are materially connected to soils, animals, water streams, gardens, fruits and vegetables, and small business sectors, and any occurrence of either human-made or natural disaster in agriculture directly affects women and their families (MacGregor, 2006). In this regard, Zilayefa’s mother and other villagers in Ijaw are farmers whose “life depends on agricultural soils...but there is continuous disintegration; it is another suppression” (Agary, 2006, p. 98). Working on the soil makes African women connected to nature like “a spider’s web” (Agary, 2006, p. 31). Despite this, here, Agary condemns oil companies for their persistent destruction of the farms of women and “alienation from their lands” (Agary, 2006, p. 86). To combat socio-environmental injustice, Agary recommends that “protecting nature is protecting women from capitalism and male-dominated oppressions” (Agary, 2006, p. 28). Hence, there is a need for “peaceful resolution of these ecological damages by all stakeholders” (Agary, 2006, p. 76) to negotiate with women, state leadership, expatriates, and others.

Undermining women’s survival, petrocapiatists facilitate ecoinjustices and oppression that have been emblematic through sex, physical ability, and socio-economic status. Here, Agary seems to condemn such injustices perpetuated through oil exploitation by transnational

companies in a foreign rural village. Not only do transnational companies, as Oulu (2016) states, but also local leaders exhibit a colonial temperament in their compliance with resource plunder. Zilayefa hereby states:

When she got to the house, she knocked on the door and said very coldly, Zilayefa, bring me bathing soap and a sponge. “Oil, Zilayefa, she said and turned away from me, walking toward the river... Oil, from where?” ... People were marching to see the Amananaowei, the head of the village. Mother turned to the river, then Amananaowei (Agary, 2006, pp. 3-4).

Inherently linked with nature (the river), Bibaebi seems to form a core of resistance to the human element by turning her face to nature rather than following the marching mass to ask the local leader, Amananaowei. Bibaebi’s connection to nature, rather than local governance, demonstrates her loyalty to the natural world, which is a source of solutions. Bibaebi is also a “mammy-water, the water spirit, like the pre-crude oil exploration of African rivers, sustains the productivity of sea animals” (Agary, 2006, p. 98) to make a comparison between the past and the present to indicate the former represents fertility and everlasting green, while the latter is the opposite.

Agary’s story reframes the notion of women’s connectedness with nature, highlighting the essential role of African women’s conservation endeavors in unleashing new energy for a sustainable future. Like her mother, Zilayefa becomes spiritually connected to nature. This inherent connection resembles her with her foremothers. Zilayefa states:

Zilayefa would go to the university and study a subject that would get me a good job with enough to take care of myself, and then I could take care of her. ... I knew that if I did not take care of her when I could finally take care of myself, the spirits of the water and my ancestors’ soils would tie my womb and make sure that, for my ungratefulness, I never experience the joy of motherhood (Agary, 2006, p. 10).

Zilayefa vows that her hope for education would determine her symbiotic relationship with her mother under the control of the spirits of the water. Realizing she was staying away from nature, Zilayefa relentlessly “begged God for forgiveness and called on [her] mother spirits for comfort” (Agary, 2006, p.178). Zilayefa follows a new rebirth strategy and orientation just like her fellow villagers to become hopeful for “jubilating over the death of the land’s leader,”...who died with two prostitutes” (Agary, 2006, p. 176).

Like her mother, Zilayefa attempts to adhere to the values of her foremothers, who respected nature. Zilayefa is connected to nature when she “soon started looking for trees and animals that resembled the girls in their village. She looked like the ones claimed for washing out *Belle*” (Agary, 2006, p.176). Reminding of the physical body of plants, Zilayefa is a spiritual connection to the natural knowledge that her foremothers retained for centuries.

Critiquing resource exploitation, Zilayefa vows to herself to “become resistant” (Agary, 2006, p. 51). Before she decides, she thinks about her haunting experience during her childhood and “considered the degraded environment of her community” (Agary, 2006, p. 43). She also resists Sergio’s cutting off forests for “timber production” (Agary, 2006, p. 90), explaining that “damaging the forest for loggings despoils the village in allegiance with timber exporters” (Agary, 2006, p. 181). Forest destruction as a form of extractivism “is tied up with transnational capital, the state, and neoliberal agendas” (Acosta, 2017, p. 81). Connected with nature, Zilayefa “uses certain fresh leaves to abort her pregnancy” (Agary, 2006, p. 190). This shows her return to her original nature (leaves), a nonhuman victim of capitalist exploitation.

## CONCLUSION

This article examines the exploitative relationship between women and neocolonial oil extraction in Kaine Agary’s novel *Yellow-Yellow*. Establishing postcolonial ecofeminism as a theoretical lens, this study reveals a harrowing picture of women who are continuously exploited due to the exploitative practice of the transnational oil companies that exploit oil. In the novel, the female character, Bibaebi, witnesses the subjugation and loss of her subsistence farmland. The recolonization of nature consequently perpetuates the exploitation of women and children. The novel is found to be a gateway to the displacement, poverty, and illegal migration of women. Thus, extractivism, as a neocolonial economic ideology of resource control, is portrayed as undermining women’s ability to access and utilize their resources for self-development and economic independence.

The article also shows a glimpse of women’s restive resistance, agency, and resilience, often demonstrated through their integration with nature. The way Bibaebi is connected to nature and her search for her daughter Zilayefa’s safety in a time of neocolonial exploitation shows how she resists without violence and how strong she is. Finally, the novel challenges readers to envision a postcolonial ecofeminist scholarship where the exploitation of nature and women coexist, urging a rethinking of the interconnectedness of women and nature as a pathway to healing from an increasingly over-exploited postcolonial Africa.

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