

REPRESENTATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN AGARY'S *YELLOW YELLOW*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of trauma in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, a Nigerian literary work that interrogates the place of trauma and oppression in Nigerian society. It explores the various forms of trauma and degradation evident in the text and the wider social context. This analysis will be carried out through a close textual reading of the primary text. Situations depicted in the novel foreground the traumatic and exploitative tendencies of the ruling class/bourgeoisie and the adverse effects of their actions on the lower class. The development of trauma theory was precipitated by studies on neurosis and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Foundational contributions were made by nineteenth-century neurologists such as Sigmund Freud, Joseph Breuer, Pierre Janet, and Jean-Martin Charcot, whose therapeutic studies on shock and hysteria helped shape the field. Trauma theory will therefore be used to investigate the psychological distress experienced by victims of oppression, exploitation, and social disruption as portrayed in the novel. The study demonstrates the devastating impact of trauma on characters subjected to unbearable conditions imposed by forces beyond their control. It also draws on Cathy Caruth's insights into the unspeakable and repetitive aspects of trauma, including the unknowing reenactment of traumatic experiences by victims. Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* represents her literary engagement with the experiences associated with crude oil exploitation in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region and its numerous destructive consequences for the inhabitants, with particular emphasis on the plight of women as victims.

Keywords: disillusionment, trauma, exploitation, dehumanization oppression,

INTRODUCTION

Different genres in African literature project varied issues that are captured in different periods within African social contexts. These issues range from imperial inversion, decolonization, post independence disillusionment, patriarchy, women oppression, environmental degradation, exploitation and political corruption, among others. The trends form what is notably perceived as the African experience. Adeola James argued that:

In the past the terms of reference of evaluating modern African literature have been provided by the critical tradition which has grown up alongside Western literature. The critics so far have failed to recognize the fact that although our writers use the European languages to express themselves, the most original among them do so with the conscious purpose of presenting an African experience and the best among them reflect in their works a specific mode of the imagination which derives from their background. (Akwanya, 2017)

African writers, both male and female, have copiously drawn attention to the situation of women in African patriarchal societies in their works. However, critical investigations into these texts have taken a feminist view to harp on the incessant low image and the burden of motherhood, wife-inheritance and other such themes.

Orabueze's position underscores the dilemma of women in African societies, where they are not just silenced, but treated as subordinates to their male counterparts. They are exploited as men's possession and objectified as sex tools, as evident in Agary's *Yellow Yellow*.

There is a consensus that the writer is a chronicler of the permutations occurring in society. Ngugi notes that “being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success the conflicts and tensions in his changing society”. Egudu points to the need for wakening the consciousness of the people. He describes the writer as a “got-sent gadfly to his society ... persistently endeavouring to rouse the society from its social, political, moral and intellectual slumber”. (*Major Themes in African Literature* 2000:73).

The above postulation justifies the choice of Agary’s *Yellow Yellow* as a suitable narrative in the light of oppression and trauma. Oppression manifest in different forms, ranging from exploitation, denial, discrimination, structural/gender based violence, abuse and impoverishment, among others. This usually plays out in a society where social and economic inequality thrives. Thereby creating a wide gap between the upper and the lower classes in society. The masses or the not privileged members of the society, so to speak, are normally at the receiving end.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is focused on explaining the theory used in the analysis of the text. Trauma is used to foreground the emotional impacts of the oppression suffered by some characters in the novel. Incidentally, the use of the aforementioned theory will project the representation of oppression and trauma elements in Kaine Agary’s *Yellow Yellow*.

Trauma Theory

The mid 1990s witnessed the rise in the discourse of trauma theory. This followed pre-existing discussions in the areas of psychoanalysis and modernism, as well as narratives on the Holocaust. The development of the trauma theory was precipitated by studies in neurosis and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). The research was made possible by the works of 19th century neurologists, like Sigmund Freud, Joseph Breuer, Pierre Janet and Jean Martin Charcot. They focused on therapeutic practices based on their studies on shock and hysteria in relation to the abnormal behavior of their patients. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association acknowledged officially the existence of trauma as a mental illness, which they referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This appeared in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, and is defined as the response to an event “outside the range of usual human experience” (236).

Trauma and Healing

Judith Herman introduced another dimension to the study of trauma. She proffered a solution for trauma, which she argued is possible through one’s narration of their painful experience. Herman’s interpretation of trauma is based on her position that telling one’s story can be a healing approach to trauma. Herman’s postulations are contained in her famous book - *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992). In the book, she stressed that:

The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can now begin their recovery. (Herman, 1992)

The application of the theory will help in exploring the instances of traumatic encounters in the narrative. This is in connection with the consequences of the oppression suffered by the major character in Agary’s *Yellow Yellow*.

TRAUMA IN YELLOW YELLOW

Ngwangwu and Iboroma examined both novels to determine the various circumstances surrounding the protagonists’ loss of parenthood. For instance, they observe that in Agary’s *Yellow Yellow*, Zilayefa’s loss of her father was consequent upon her biological father’s migration as a Greek merchant. In addition, their evaluation of the texts indicated that the family structure is vital in the formation of the children, especially when it comes to imparting moral/ethical values on them. Their opinion is that where there is a vacuum as a result of the absence of one of the parents, it usually has adverse effects on the children. This, according to the critics, accounts for the loose life of certain characters in the texts. In the article, Ngwangwu and Iboroma (2018) disclosed that:

We found that the family structure has positive and negative influences on its members. The loose life Emem lives, gossiping, flirting with men as also shown in her advice to Zilayefa speaks volume of this influence. Zilayefa’s inconsiderate acceptance of Sergio and Admiral, her constant night sneaks as well as those of other

girls who sell their bodies in the cities are some of the influences of the family because there is a lack of strong control system as a result of the absence of one member of the parents.

What is pointed out is that children from single parent background are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and negative influences, as in the case of Zilayefa. The analysis of Agary's *Yellow Yellow* also revealed that Zilayefa's unrestrained submission to Admiral and Sergio's overtures is in connection with her yearning for a father figure. The argument is that the absence her father created an emotional vacuum which she found in both men. Their conclusion is that, unlike conventional works of most Nigerian female writers, Kaine and Atta have shown some level of uniqueness by delving into the dynamics of family structures and the challenges of single parenthood in a typical Nigeria society.

Like Chukwulobe Innocent, Oseghale Francis (2019) subjected Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* to ecological investigation. But while Chukwulobe was focused on what referred to as postcolonial eco-criticism, Oseghale explored the narrative with conventional eco-critical discourse; which he argued is as old as man's existence. Oseghale noted that the relevance of the ecosystem to man's survival has attracted the attention of creative writers to addressing the problems of environmental pollution in their works. He observed that:

Most writers are concerned about the threats to the natural environment as a result of urbanization and industrialization. They also feel intensely the rapid and degree of human destruction of nature. To them, there is the increasing need to preserve what the natural environment remained. Hence, writers are concerned about the wanton degradation and destructing of the environment by sophisticated chemical pesticides which have affected wildlife, land, and water. (Oseghale, 2019)

Apparently, writers represented the ecological situations of man in the society in order to raise the consciousness of the people to threat posed by the exploitation of natural resources in the environment. Oseghale opined that because of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region, the environment has been polluted, thereby making life very unbearable for the inhabitants. He concurred with Ubah Sylvanus et al that the devastating impacts of multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta region has contributed significantly to widespread poverty and hardship in the society. This is due to the destruction of the people's farmland and other means of livelihood. Oseghale's observation is that:

Right from the beginning of creation, the rural dwellers have regarded the soil as a means of sustenance. It supplies them all their human needs for meaningful existence. Hence, members of the Niger-Delta community who are purely farmers engage in agricultural activities. However, with the discovery of oil in the region, the activities of oil explorers have caused more harm than good to the people. This is vividly manifested in the novel when oil spillage destroys the farms of the people including that of Zilayefa's mother. The people are astonished and incapacitated; (330)

The people's incapacitation has direct consequence from the insensitivity of both the oil explorers and the people's government to their suffering. The masses' untold hardship has a psychological toll on them because of the frustration occasioned by the wickedness of the oil companies. In addition to subjecting the people of the Niger Delta to denial, the abandonment of the people's welfare led to growing social vices such as prostitution, youth restiveness and corruption. We see:

Many boys who are unable to complete their school education join the growing army fighting for justice in the Niger-Delta region. These youths steal, blackmail, and vandalize oil pipe lines. They claim to be fighting for the progress and recognition of the Ijaw people of the Niger-Delta. However, the capitalists that operate the oil companies use Nigerian armed forces to terrorize and brutalize them. Some of them are eliminated in various ways. Some are jailed, some disappeared mysteriously, and others are killed, while some are invited to meetings where they are poisoned. (Oseghale, 2019)

This point validates Ubah Sylvanus et al's condemnation of the exploitation of the people of the Niger Delta, especially the violent confrontation between the youths and the government mercenary protecting the oil companies. The military men seize the opportunity to destroy lives and property, especially that the younger generation who are the future of the society. He also x-rayed institutional corruption as the bane of Nigerian society. This is evident in the handling of the people's collective interests by the leaders of the country.

Conclusion

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is not merely a work of literary entertainment but a narrative about a people whose natural blessings have become sources of pain and suffering. The devastation and trauma inflicted on the Niger Delta region

have raised serious concerns among literary critics. The restiveness and persistent struggle for justice often framed as the quest for resource control have resulted in violent clashes between the youths and government agents, leading to significant loss of lives. The youths of the Niger Delta have been compelled to view life as a continuous struggle for justice and equity.

Critics such as Ubah Sylvanus et al. condemn the exploitation of the Niger Delta people, particularly the violent confrontations between the youths and government mercenaries protecting oil companies. The military often exploits such situations to destroy lives and property, especially targeting the younger generation, who represent the future of the society. These critics also highlight institutional corruption as a major problem in Nigeria, evident in the way national leaders mishandle the collective interests of the people.

The novel also demonstrates that the family structure has both positive and negative influences on its members. The morally loose lifestyle of Emem her gossiping and flirtation with men along with the advice she gives to Zilayefa, underscores these influences. Zilayefa's uncritical acceptance of Sergio and Admiral, her frequent nighttime escapades, and the experiences of other girls who resort to sex work in urban areas reveal the consequences of weak family control systems, often resulting from the absence of one parent. The narrative underscores that children from single-parent backgrounds are more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and negative influences, as exemplified by Zilayefa. Ultimately, Kaine Agary compels her readers to confront the violations that women and the environment suffer at the hands of patriarchy and government institutions in Nigerian society.

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