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Co-Victims of Suffering: The Exploitation of Nature and Women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*

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Abstract
An organic perspective considers nature as a sacred, living, sensitive, and feminine organism and imagines it as a compassionate, benign, and nurturing mother through whom every being gets life. By implication, the physiological functions of reproduction and nurturing, which women possess, tie them to nature in a symbolic dimension. This bond connects them in a symbiotic relationship in which the abuse of nature translates into the suffering of women. This paper adopts ecofeminism as a theoretical perspective to interrogate how Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* advance the joint exploration, exploitation, degradation and abandonment of the Niger Delta environment and women by patriarchal powers represented by multinational oil corporations, the Federal Government of Nigeria and men.
Keywords: Ecofeminism, Exploitation, Niger Delta, Environment, Degradation, Woman.

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Introduction

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* portray the troubling reality of crude oil exploration and exploitation operations of multinational oil conglomerates and their local accomplices in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The novels expose the grim reality of doom that the oil boom has become. The exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta has engendered severe human and ecological problems. Crude oil was discovered in large quantities by Shell British Petroleum (also known as Royal Dutch Shell) in 1956 in a small village called Oloibiri, which is now in the Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. This was after many years of fruitless search. In 1958, Shell began commercial crude oil production in the Niger Delta at 5,100 barrels per day. By 1960, the oil conglomerate had entered a boom that pushed it to an unexpected peak production of about 2.44 million barrels per day.

The Niger Delta soon became invaded by more Multinational oil corporations, such as AGIP, Elf, Chevron, Mobil, and Tenneco, who were attracted by the bountiful harvest that Shell was reaping in Nigeria. The Nigerian Federal Government was quick to grant each of them a license to prospect for and exploit crude oil. Although this move ended Royal Dutch Shell's sole concessionary rights, the company produced about 50 percent of Nigeria's crude oil. The crude oil exploitation activities of these foreign and indigenous oil firms have turned the Niger Delta into a mangrove of oil wells. Onuoha and Anifowose (2018), state that "the Niger Delta region (comprising the nine state of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Crose River, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Imo and Rivers) has up to 606 oil field, 5,284 oil wells and a 7,000 km oil and gas pipelines which crisscross the region" (23)

The crude oil boom and its monetary gains made the Nigerian economy become crude oil-based. Crude oil was to overtake agro-products as the federal government's main source of revenue. According to Oluduro and Oluduro (2012), "the Nigerian government earns about USS20 million per day from crude oil. Since Nigeria joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1971 as its 11th member, the country's crude oil revenue has continued to increase (48). Akpotor (2019), reveals that "Petroleum and derivatives dominate the Nigerian economy making up about 98 percent of exports, over 80 percent of government's annual revenue and 70 percent of budgetary expenditure" (41). The position of Akpotor aligns with the postulation of Wosu O.O. (2025). According to him "the enormous deposit of hydrocarbons in the Niger Delta region and its exploitation have enriched the Nigerian nation, making it the largest producer of crude oil in Africa and the sixth most important exporter of crude oil in the world…" (59)

However, despite the monetary gains accruing to the federal government of Nigeria from crude oil exploitation, there are many other adverse environmental and social impacts it has had on the people of the Niger Delta. From 1958, when Royal Dutch Shell began commercial crude oil production, to now, there are records of the unquantifiable human and ecological devastation caused by crude oil exploration, drilling, and refining in the Niger Delta region. Many scholars such as Udosen, Etok and George have reported the overwhelming and negative impacts of oil exploration and exploitation activities on the environment and inhabitants of the Niger Delta. Some of the negative impacts include: destruction of ecosystems, air, land, and water pollution, exposure to chemical and biological hazards, and physical and mental illness. Oluduro and Durojaye (2013) summarize the whole scenario thus: "Whilst a considerable benefit is derived through the exploitation of oil by the Nigerian government and the oil MNCs…, for each gain

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there are several negative externalities or 'disbenefits' to the local inhabitants of the regions, particularly the women" (4). This implies that there is a connection that exists between the exploitation of the environment and the suffering of women. Nature and women are, therefore, joint-sufferers of the exploitation by oil companies. This summarizes the concern of this paper.

The Concept of Ecofeminism

The dual exploitation of nature and women by patriarchal forces represented by men and multinational oil firms has continued as the basis of public discourse among concerned persons. The ruthless exploration, exploitation, and abandonment of nature and women constitute one of the major concerns of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism, derived from 'ecology' and 'feminism' emerged from a combination of the ecological protection movement and the women's liberation movement. The industrial revolution, which characterized modernization, engendered ecological problems that threatened the continued existence of life in the modern world. On the heels of the ecological problems were socio-cultural issues such as gender inequality and division. Implicitly, ecological problems and gender inequality are twin challenges created by industrialization. These two challenges have continued to constitute issues of global importance and discourse. It is therefore from this scenario that ecofeminism emerged as a commitment to effectively addressing ecological and gender problems. 'Ecofeminism,' the shortened form of ecological feminism, was introduced by the French intellectual Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book Le Feminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death), in which she established the relationship between the dual exploitation (oppression) of nature and women. Since its introduction into academic vocabulary, ecofeminism has continued to grow through the efforts of many adherents, such as Karen Warren, Val Plumwood, Mary Daly, Susan Coriffin, Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, etc., who have made seminal contributions to its further development and regularization.

Annette Kolodny, in a seminal article, "Unearthing Herstory: An Introduction," situates the feminization of nature and naturalization of the feminine in romantic sensibilities which flourished alongside the discovery of the 'New World'. She speaks of an "…. initial impulse to experience the NEW WORLD landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a material garden, receiving and nurturing human children" (172). This act of experiencing nature as essentially feminine informs the ecofeminist inclination for conceiving an interconnection between women and nature. Therefore, the suffering and oppression of women as a result of the exploitation of nature show patriarchal domination of both. Ecofeminist theory is, therefore, anchored in the view that the exploitation of nature and oppression of women are carried out by the social patriarchal system due to the fact that both nature and women are regarded as property; 'objects' that are liable to be owned and also exploited (Wiyamti, Suryaman and Swatikasari, 517). Ecofeminism responds to all forms of domination of not only women but of all other creatures; hence the submission of Karen Warren, one of ecofeminism's theorists, that "the basic starting point of ecofeminist philosophy is that the dominations of women, other human others, and nonhuman nature are interconnected, are wrong, and ought to be eliminated (Cuomo, 5). The concept of ecofeminism insists that capitalism engenders patriarchal and anthropocentric values. This opinion suggests that capitalism favours men, 'disfavours' women and breaks the bond between nature and culture. It also engineers a binary opposition of men/women, culture/nature, reason/emotion, etc, which ecofeminists believe can be eliminated through a fusion of ecological and feminist ethics. The importance of ecological principles and feminist ideas to ecofeminism cannot be overstated. David Kronlid explains that "environmental ethics and

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feminist ethics focus on two important social and theoretical issues, namely the welfare of nonhuman nature and the unequal relationship between men and women" (14). Ecofeminism, therefore, derives its guiding principles and practice from a combination of environmental and feminist concerns. In view of this, Daniel Perez Marina posits that the only trait that distinguishes ecofeminism is that "it advocates that environmental issues are feminist issues and that feminist issues are environmental issues". So "the domination of nature and the domination of women are interconnected" (2).

From a simplified perspective, ecofeminists fight the cause of women and nature against the oppressive actions of patriarchy. Ecofeminism is thus anchored in the interconnections that exist between nature and women. To this end, Marina (3-4) outlines the following beliefs that characterize or qualify any activity as ecofeminist:

1. There exists a system of oppression that enforces the domination of nature.
2. There exists a system of oppression that enforces the domination of women.
3. The domination of nature and the domination of women are interconnected and
4. The domination of nature and the domination of women are unjustified and have to end.

This paper therefore reads Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* as texts that portray the parallel domination of nature and of women. It situates the domination and exploitation of women in the patriarchal Niger Delta society on the same pedestal as the domination and exploitation of the natural environment of the Niger Delta region.

Literature Review

Kaine Agary's debut novel, *Yellow-Yellow*, has garnered wide critical reviews since its publication in 2006. It has served as the primary text for many literary studies, all of which are beyond the scope of this review. However, a select few studies within our reach offer various perspectives on the novel. Adewumi (2022), in his "Effects of Environmental Desecration," reads *Yellow-Yellow* as a text that portrays ecocritical sensibilities because it reveals Agary's "environmental mindfulness" (74). According to him, the novelist understands the "ecological implication of man's exploitative tendencies" in the Niger Delta environment, so she uses her novel to "berate these forces that promote the unchecked desecration of the mother earth …" (74). By exposing the ecological and human problems prevalent in the Niger Delta as a result of crude oil exploration and exploitation, Agary uses *Yellow-Yellow* to "vividly portray the evil consequences of the discovery of oil" (79) in the region. In "The Displaced Male-Image in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*", Chukwumah I. (2013) applies Freudian and Jungian theories in his investigation. His essay systematically examines "the provocations, corollaries, and correlations of the displaced male-image through its absence and presence" (47). Chukwumah argues that whatever its mutation-father, lover, friend, autocrat, deliverer, oppressor, etc.- "the super-structural image of the male person hangs, like an unseen shadow, over and above *Yellow-Yellow's* major character, motivating her actions" (47). By projecting the conspicuous presence of the male image in *Yellow-Yellow* as the major force that drives the action of its female protagonist, Chukwumah critiques the novel as a narrative that "significantly undermines the depiction of those peculiar environmental problems" (61) of the Niger Delta region.

Koussouhon and Dossoumoun (2014) provide a linguistic study of Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. Anchoring the work in the Lexico-grammar theory, the critics argue that Agary encodes experiential and textual meaning through language. Their use of systemic functional linguistics in

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analyzing the text *Yellow-Yellow* reveals that the author carefully organizes her language to effectively create and convey meaning. The textual and experiential metafunction encoded by Agary, which they analyzed, informs their conclusion that Yellow-Yellow is "in a good position to reconstruct the past and the present in proper perspectives in order to project the future" (2435) of the Nigerian nation.

Donsomsakulkij (2018) provides another insightful reading of Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. Using the theory of agential realism, coined by feminist and physicist Karen Barad, Weeraya Donsomsakulkij examines how the concept of agency is reimagined in the novel through the struggles of Ziyalefa, a human actor, and other nonhuman actors against patriarchal forces emblematized by multinational oil companies and their local collaborators. According to the critic, *Yellow-Yellow* is an apt "representation of an environmental ethics in the form of an unbroken bond of multiple agents among which are humans and nonhumans that need to be considered and sustained" (221). Agary's narrative, Donsomsakulkij avers, reveals the equal potency and power of both human and nonhuman agency. This is so because Agary purposefully emphasizes that the lives of humans and the natural environment are interdependent through the fictional world, in which the agency of water, plants, voice,, and Ziyayefa herself has been redefined and mutually equipped with the power of narrativity (230).

There is, therefore, no passive agency; all agencies are active, whether human or nonhuman. Oseghale (2019) attempts an ecocritical analysis of *Yellow-Yellow* in his study. He reveals that the exploration and exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria affect plants, animals, aquatic life, and human lives. According to the critic, Agary's novel graphically portrays the negative consequences of crude oil discovery. Some of these consequences include: untold hardship, exploitation of the people and the environment, pollution of farmland, destruction of plants and aquatic life, etc. Oseghale concludes that the discovery, exploration, and exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta have created ecological and human problems that require alleviation (335).

Ogunrotimi (2022), Adeosun, and Adeseke, on their own part, approached *Yellow-Yellow* from another vantage point. Post-colonialism provides the critics with the theoretical background against which they read Agary's novel as a critique of "Nigeria's venal climate of corruption, infrastructural decay, ethnic bias, sexual oppression and poverty and how these have disrupted the viral strings that once held the traditional communities together in pre-colonial times" (54). It is their informed opinion that Agary's thematic preoccupation illustrates the pitiably morbid social reality of the Nigerian nation which results from the overwhelming degree of "venality, the continuous mishandling of national ethics, and the constant deployment of disintegrative dynamics that cause contextual dystopia" (54). It is quite instructive that they succeed in establishing a parallel between Zilayefa's character and her ordeal and the national peculiarities of Nigeria (63).

The reviewed literature provides deep and varied insights into Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. This paper is an addition to the numerous critical appraisals of the novel. It advances the discourse on *Yellow-Yellow* from an ecofeminist point of view as it posits that the narrative portrays nature and women as convictions of the suffering engendered by patriarchal forces of domination and oppression.

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May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*, unlike Agary's *Yellow-Yellow,* was not welcomed into the literary world with wide reviews. There is still a dearth of critical studies of the novel, as our searches did not yield the results we expected. Yinka Olatunbosun, in a 2015 review of Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* entitled "*Oil Cemetery* Wins ANA-Chevron prize," exposes how the human inhabitants of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria wrestle with the environmental despoliation resulting from the exploration and exploitation of crude oil in their communities. Olatunbosun righteously avers that the narrative plot revolves around the female protagonist, Ruth, who "leads a subtle revolution that would later shock her entire community" (12) and brings the change they so much desired.

Fajemyo (2017), offers what may be the first book-length study of Nwoye's creative corpus. Writing about *Oil Cemetery*, he opines that Nwoye portrays another topical contemporary issue, which is the exploitation of crude oil by multinational oil conglomerates who end up leaving the people in hunger and abject poverty and deprivation, even as their environment is completely degraded. Okedinn (2017), appraises *Oil Cemetery* as a worthy addition to the growing literature on "the political and environmental tragedy of oil exploration in Nigeria as well as in the sphere of conflict resolution" (4). In his words, Nwoye succeeds in utilizing her creative writing skills to represent the conspicuous intractable problems arising from oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. She succeeds in proffering "dialogue between oil companies and their host communities" as a means of "finding solutions to the challenges of oil exploration" (6)

In a similar vein, Eazy (2018) opines that Nwoye's novel portrays the callous, dubious, and exploitative acts of oil firms operating in the Niger Delta, as well as the "role of women towards liberating the region from the shackles of poverty and environmental degradation" (2). However, Eazy accuses Nwoye of failing to blame the government for conspiring with oil companies to engender the human and environmental problems prevalent in the Niger Delta. This is true because the government is not indicted for its complicity in the degradation of the Nigeria Delta. He, however, praises Nwoye for projecting the important "role of the Niger Delta women in the common struggle towards the liberation of their people from the shackles of poverty and rescuing their environment from pollution and degradation" (9).

On his own part, Yakubu (2019), offers a fresh perspective by appraising the novel as a communicative event. Yakubu draws on Wolfgang Iser's reception theory to argue that the novel functions as a means of communication between the author and her readers. In his words, the novel is a "channel of communication" through which the author's message- "improvement of the condition of the people of the Niger Delta and preservation of their environment through activism" (46) is passed to the receiver. The foregoing review presented the invaluable contributions of critics toward the critical appraisal of Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery.* Indeed, none of the papers provide an ecofeminist perspective as this present study intends to carry out. This paper, therefore, uses insights from ecological feminism to critically analyze the novel, exposing the interconnections between nature and women, both of whom are co-victims of the dominant ideology of patriarchy.

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Exploitation, Degradation and Abandonment of Women and Nature in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* not only exposes how the Niger Delta environment is being degraded through crude oil exploitation but also establishes a connection between the exploitation of nature and women by patriarchal forces, as represented by men and some cultural practices. The narrative depicts the suffering of women due to the exploitation of nature. As a matter of fact, Agary presents both nature and women as victims and co-sufferers of patriarchal subjugation and exploitation. The narrative depicts a close connection between nature and women by revealing how the exploitation of nature translates into the exploitation of women and how nature's agony brings about women's misery. The environment (an aspect of nature) and the woman are treated equally. Both are explored, exploited, degraded, and abandoned by the men. Just as the Niger Delta environment is exploited and abandoned by multinational oil corporations, the protagonist's mother, Bibi, is also exploited and abandoned by a Greek sailor who took advantage of her naivety, got her pregnant and disappeared into thin air. This is narrated by Zilayefa, the product of the romance, thus:

> My father was a sailor whose ship had docked briefly in Nigeria about one year before I was born. After months at sea, he was just happy to see a woman…The woman he chose was my mother, an eighteen-year-old, young and naïve…For the few weeks that he was in Port Harcourt, she was in heaven… He left Port Harcourt without saying goodbye. She went to the port one day to look for him… and was told his ship had left. There was no message; he was just gone, leaving behind his planted seed in my mother's belly. Disillusioned, my mother went back to her village to face the shame of being an unwed mother… (*Yellow-Yellow*, 7-8).

This, of course, is the ordeal of the Niger Delta environment with its rich and supposedly inexhaustible hydrocarbon deposit. It has been severely exploited and abandoned by multinational oil companies in connivance with Nigeria's federal government through their crude oil exploration and exploitation activities. Sadly enough, Bibi and Zilayefa, her daughter, represent the Niger Delta women who are exploited and abandoned by both indigenes and foreigners, just like the Niger Delta environment. One notices that Zilayefa suffers a similar fate to her mother's. While in Port Harcourt, Admiral also took advantage of her naivety and her hankering for "an emotional bond with him" (*Yellow-Yellow*, 149); just like the one between a father and his daughter, and by the time she got pregnant, he abandoned her. She narrates: "There was no need for a discussion. He did not ask whether I wanted to keep the child. He did not care, and if I kept the baby, I was definitely on my own. … I was jolted into reality. Admiral did not have the time to commit to me … (*Yellow-Yellow*, 162).

It is instructive to mention that the connection between women and the environment is one in which the exploitation and degradation of one translates to the doom of the other. As the environment suffers from the oil spillage that drowned Bibi's farm, she also suffers from hardship, hunger and deprivation because her main source of livelihood was taken away in the process. Therefore, environmental exploitation and despoliation worsen her life; hence Itaug's (2013) submission that "the destruction of the land is invariably the destruction of the woman's effort" (18) and her hope of providing her daughter, Zilayefa, with a university education. Arguably, Agary's depiction of women and the environment suggests a connection in which both are regarded as objects and possessions that can be exploited or used however the men want. Both are the primary victims of patriarchal domination, exploitation, and degradation. Just as

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multinational oil corporations dominate and despoil the Niger Delta environment, the Niger Delta men subject their women and wives to the same kind of treatment. The narrative voice explains:

> Nowadays, the men were even more oppressive than the women alive could remember… some women walked around deaf in one ear because they had dared to question their husband's wisdom in spending the last kobo in the house on booze. Women with distended bellies that resembled pregnancies, caused by uterine fibroids, were confined to their rooms because a diviner had investigated and confirmed them to be witches. (*Yellow-Yellow*, 40)

Worthy of mention also is the exploitation and dehumanization of young girls who resort to prostitution as a means of escaping the poverty and deprivation in the rural areas induced by the exploitation of the environment. These girls are sexually exploited and even abused by some of the expatriates who work for the multinational oil corporations. The narrator reveals that these girls sometimes become the victims "of a crazy whitey who beat them up or pushed objects like bottles into their privates as part of the 'fun'" (*Yellow-Yellow*, 27). In addition, local touts who act as pimps join 'these crazy whiteys' exploiting, dehumanizing, and oppressing the young girls because:

> Occasionally, the local boys would remind the girls that they still had power in town. They would attack the shacks where the girls lived, beat them up, steal their money, and if their minds had been taken over by the evil spirits in booze and hard drugs, they would destroy all the property that had gotten in the way of their mission. (*Yellow-Yellow*, 38)

Obviously, Agary portrays women as beings who are victims of male domination, oppression, and exploitation. Agary's women are sexually and economically exploited by expatriate oil workers, their husbands, local men and even boys. The milieu she explores reveals the reality of patriarchal domination and exploitation of nature and women, in which both suffer as victims of the same fate.

Additionally, the narrative also reveals the wanton exploitation of nature in the Niger Delta region. This manifests in two distinct ways: crude oil exploitation and logging. The discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa State opened the door for many multinational oil corporations to enter the Niger Delta, and all were granted licenses by the federal government of Nigeria to prospect for and exploit oil in the region. This marks the beginning of the callously atrocious exploitation of nature in the Niger Delta as crude oil pipes began to crisscross the length and width of the region, through farmland, rivers, and even homesteads. Zilayefa, Agary's narrator, reveals:

> Sometimes, when I would sit outside with boys and girls in my age group, we would listen to the radio, and sometimes we would hear an Ijaw person… speaking about how the oil companies had destroyed our Niger Delta with impunity. They would discuss how the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others (*Yellow-Yellow*, 9).

Sadly, though, for the poor masses in the Niger Delta, the oil wealth exploited by oil companies enriches just a handful of political elites, leaving the masses impoverished. The narrative voice openly references the oil pipelines that carried wealth from beneath (her) land into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria… (*Yellow-Yellow*, 39) At other times, she narrates how these oil pipelines break and spill the oil they carry (*Yellow-Yellow*, 3, 4, 9, 10, 39, etc.). Unarguably, the

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oil exploited from the natural environment of the Niger Delta has enriched the federal government. The contribution of oil resource exploitation in Nigeria is aptly captured thus:

> Oil and gas from the region (that is, the Niger Delta) are the main source of revenue for the Nigerian state, accounting for about 97% of the country's total exports. Since the discovery of oil in the region, oil has dominated the country's economy. Conclusive reports state that, due to oil exploration and exploitation activities, the area has become an ecological wasteland (Kadafa 'Oil Exploration', 41).

This submission shows that the oil resource embedded in the Niger Delta environment has been and continues to be exploited by multinational oil corporations with the full support of Nigeria's federal government. It also reveals that the Nigerian state and oil companies are the gainers, while the Niger Deltans are the losers.

Although crude oil is the major natural resource being exploited in the Niger Delta region and has obviously attracted wide attention, timber is also a natural resource being exploited there. With its reputation as "the largest mangrove forests in Africa and the third largest in the world", the Niger Delta area is referred to as "the richest part of Nigeria in terms of petroleum resources and diverse natural respurces (Ite et al, 80), which enhance the growth and survival of many species of flora and fauna. Logging is simply the business or process of cutting down trees, removing them from the forest, and processing them for sale as timber and/or pulp. Logging is of two types: selective and clear-cutting. In selective logging, loggers choose only the trees that produce highly valued wood, while in clear-cutting, they cut down all types of trees indiscriminately. Logging, though a business that yields revenue, has negative effects on the environment and on human beings.

In Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, the eponymous narrator draws the reader's attention to this lucrative business, which, by implication, doubles as exploitation of nature. According to the narratives, Sergio, a white man, had accompanied his friend Tarilabo to the funeral rites of his brother, Chief Semoke, with the ulterior motive of starting a logging business in the Niger Delta forests. The narrator reveals that Sergio stayed back in the village long after other guests had gone, only because they (him and his friend, Tarilabo), were trying to conduct some business. They were interested in logging timber from the forests in our village…" (*Yellow-Yellow*, 22). It is rather instructive that logging timber in the forests of the Niger Delta was "a business proposition of Tarilabo" (*Yellow-Yellow*, 22), which would yield revenue for the business and, on the other hand, degrade the environment. This foregrounds the complicity of the indigenous businessman in the exploitation and despoliation of the Niger Delta environment. It is, therefore, obviously in light of the devastation of nature that Azibaola Robert avers that:

> …the forest has been so devastated by logging; people have cut down trees, natural trees, heavy trees that protect the environment that gave us oxygen, people have logged them down, and there is no regulation when it comes to wood logging in the Niger Delta and in fact in Nigeria, so it is a disaster that is waiting to unfold (qtd in Samuel, 1).

Truly, especially as Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and the discussion so far reveal, there is ample evidence of the exploitation of nature and women in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. As nature and women are objectified as possessions by the patriarchal social order that prevails in the milieu of the text, both become victims and co-sufferers of the oppression and exploitation meted out to them by agents of patriarchy. Agary, through an ecofeminist consciousness, ties the exploitation

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and degradation of women to the exploitation and despoliation of nature. Her fiction explores the plight of the populace, especially women, resulting from oil exploitation in the Niger Delta.

Co-Victims of Suffering: The Exploitation of Nature and Women in May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*

Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* is not only a narrative of how crude oil exploitation and exploration have degraded and ruined the Niger Delta environment; it also enumerates the rather intricate connection between the exploitation and ruination of the environment and the domination and subjugation of women. It graphically portrays women and nature as co-victims of suffering being meted out to them by the domineering force of patriarchy. *Oil Cemetery* presents in vivid imagery how both nature and women are exploited in the Niger Delta region; both are subjected to heart-rending catastrophe as a result of environmental degradation engendered by crude oil companies.

Nwoye portrays Niger Delta women as a hardworking group meaningfully engaged in farming or fishing as a means of survival. Most of them who are married in a polygamous family are left to work hard on their farms in order to feed their family. Some of the men, such as Pa Onwuzulike, Izundu's father, "never aspired to anything except taking titles and marrying wives who, invariably, were now fending for themselves" and were also taking "turns preparing food for him and warming his bed" (*Oil Cemetery,* 3). This presupposes that women are treated as objects or possessions, akin to a title that boosts a man's social status. It implies the exploitation of wives by their husbands. The women are presented as victims who, though married to a man, struggle to fend for themselves and their husbands and still go ahead to warm his bed. This kind of scenario compels one to wonder what the husband contributes to the running of the family, if not to exploit his wives. In other words, Pa Onwuzulike exploits the resources of these women in a manner similar to how multinational oil companies exploit natural resources, such as crude oil, in the Niger Delta.

The intricate connection between the women and nature is such that environmental ruination disengages the women from their occupation. The fact that women are responsible for fending for themselves and their family through their occupation, which could either be farming or fishing, places them in a disadvantaged position. The continuous destruction of biodiversity through oil spillage affects the women more, as farmlands are rendered infertile and useless, and as aquatic life is destroyed, the women whose local sources of sustenance have been so compromised suffer untold hardship. Nwoye's narrator recounts the sad ordeal of a young widow who suffers dispossession alongside nature:

> Tying her child behind her back, she cursed the oil companies and their collaborators …. This woman had cried continuously, day and night, for six weeks. Her farmland, her only source of livelihood, had been taken away from her because a pipe passed through that portion of land. (*Oil cemetery*, 86-87)

It is evident that both this widow and her farmland are affected by oil exploitation. The pollution of farmland by oil pipelines renders it useless, as much as the widow who depends on it for survival is disengaged from her occupation without being provided with a sustainable alternative. So as the farmland suffers from pollution, the widow also suffers dispossession, making both of them co-victims of the exploitative inclination of the multinational oil conglomerates and their local collaborators. It is argued in this paper that this widow represents women who suffer more because of their connection with nature. This explains why, when "the harvest was too dry" (*Oil*

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Cemetery 113), foretelling an imminent famine and hunger, the women were … more worried than the men because they had to take care of the children" (*Oil Cemetery*, 114). Furthermore, as co-victims of exploitation by a capitalist patriarchy, both nature and women lose their resources. The Niger Delta region, a part of the natural environment, is portrayed as a victim that loses its resources, which are crude oil, to the multinational oil companies, the consequence being that it loses its vitality, fertility, and viability as a source of sustenance to the Niger Delta women. The women, on their part, lose not only the farmland but also their children. The exploitative inclination of oil companies leads nature to lose it oil while the women lose their children. Mama Jude and Mama Nkere are two Niger Delta women who lose their sons the same way the land loses crude oil because of the insatiable avarice of oil merchants. In the suit Ubolu community filed against Zebulon Oil Company, both women stood as witnesses because "they had come to realize that their late sons were both victims of the oil company's greed" (*Oil Cemetery*, 179). Jude and Nkere had died in a scuffle as a result of oil money. Their death is therefore connected to the exploitation of nature and women through the oil exploration and exploitation activities of the Zebulon Oil Company.

It is instructive that women suffer a double tragedy in the Niger Delta scenario. Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* portrays the fact that Ubolu women's suffering as a result of crude oil extraction is double-barreled. As the Niger Delta environment is subjected to serial exploitation and total ruination, the women are, as a consequence, subjected to double violence. Firstly, women principally shoulder the responsibility for the economic survival of their family members, including their husbands. They suffer economic losses from oil exploitation, which renders their farmland unfit for agriculture and destroys aquatic life. Secondly, they are denied shares from compensation paid for the degradation of their farmlands. Nwoye's narrator reveals that:

> Men could often secure a share, but women, in general, were discriminated against in making claims and in collecting compensation from oil companies and chiefs. Widows were hardest hit, as they had no man to speak on their behalf. Thus, women were often cheated out of their possessions and out of any inheritance. (*Oil Cemetery*, 191)

Implicitly, nature and women are objectified and treated as mere appendages to men. Even in this cultural milieu where men are portrayed as generally lazy and unconcerned about the welfare of their wives and children, yet they are allowed to wield so much power with which they exploit the women. The men seem to be unaffected by the oil doom, yet they collect compensation even when they are not victims, while the women, who are the real victims, are deprived of their share and are thus subjected to further suffering. As co-victims, women and nature are treated as possessions of the men who can exploit or use them according to their whims and caprices.

It is unfortunate, especially for women and nature, that crude oil was discovered in the Niger Delta region, using Ubolu Community as a microcosm. Since Zebulon Oil Company installed its first oil pipeline on the land of Ubolu, the community has been on a downward slope toward the precipice of suffering, with nature and women as the worst victims. The multinational oil conglomerates, aptly represented by Zebulon Oil Company, Sizzle Oil Company, and Deco Oil, are only interested in the oil wealth of the community and do not care about the welfare of the local populace. Their greed drives them into the wanton ruination of the environment of their host communities without paying adequate or even any compensation for the damage. As a consequence, women are subjected to great suffering, deprivation, and dispossession. Therefore,

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as Ubolu land is subdued and ravished, Ubolu women are dispossessed, neglected, and dehumanized. Indeed, May Ifeoma Nwoye, in her *Oil Cemetery*, makes a bold statement on the interrelationship between nature and women, in which the exploitation and ruination of the former lead to the domination, dispossession, and suffering of the latter.

Conclusion

Through their creative presentations, Kaine Agary and May Ifeoma Nwoye, through *Yellow-Yellow* and *Oil Cemetery*, respectively, offer an ecofeminist perspective on the Niger Delta problem. By making women the heroines of their respective narratives, they both present how the persistent issue of crude oil exploitation and its attendant consequences affect nature, women, and children. They unarguably approach the ecological problems in the Niger Delta through a feminist perspective. They succeed in portraying the interconnections between women and the natural environment, a scenario in which women and nature suffer oppression by patriarchal forces of domination. By implication, they also call for an end to the domination and exploitation of nature and women.

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