

**World of Agency Revisited: Representation of Environmental Ethics for the Niger Delta in
Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006)****Weeraya Donsomsakulkij**

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Abstract

As an attempt to disclose environmental degradation of the Niger Delta and the suffering of its residents since the oil exploration in 1957, Kaine Agary with her novel *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) represents the effects of the ecological destruction that socially and environmentally impact a marginalized group of Nigerian people as well as the natural surrounding of the Niger Delta. Employing the literary approach of agential realism with its new material turn, this paper investigates the ways in which *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) re-imagines the concept of agency through the struggling of female human protagonist, named Zilayefa, and nonhuman actors against the forces of oil exploitation. In doing so, the paper reveals the representation of an environmental ethics in forms of an unbroken bond of multiple agents among which are humans and nonhumans that need to be considered and sustained. This paper aims to become an example of how environmental literature could inspire and urge for environmental preservation and conservation in the reality.

Keywords: agential realism, environmental literature, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, literary criticism, representation of environmental ethics

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Introduction

When discussing about the Niger Delta, many would have an image of the Niger River at the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. They would also think of palm oil and an oil-rich region as well as the center of international controversy over the environmental pollutions, violation of human rights and environmental degradation. All of these crucial issues are related and ask for urgent ethical consideration that would mutually consider environmental conditions as much as human conditions. A way to urge this ethical consideration is through the use of imagery in forms of environmental literature, constructing and representing meaning through language, images and imaginations. Some Nigerian writers, such as Ken Saro-Wiwa and Kaine Agary to name a few, have been doing so, yet their voices are still very much marginalized, especially for the literary analysis of environmental literature.

Attempting to resurface one of their voices and insisting on a significance of environmental literature in inspiring environmental-ethical consideration, this paper analyses Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, focusing on the representation of environmental ethics that highlights critical circumstances of the Niger Delta which need to be discussed and concerned. In doing so, the paper first establishes the research framework by introducing the new material turn and a literary theoretical approach of new materialisms, particularly agential realism, coined by the feminist physicist Karen Barad. Upon this ground, the paper examines how the protagonist Zilayefa asserts the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta, caused by the activities of the oil multinationals, through her intra-action with nonhuman environment around her, constituting an intra-relationship in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006). As a result, the paper reveals the narrative power of nonhuman agency that allows Zilayefa to make meaning, conveying an environmental ethics from the Niger Delta.

The Material Turn and The New Materialisms

If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of sea (Foucault, 1971, p. 386)

This ending excerpt of Foucault's announcement of the disappearance of man in *The Order of Things* (1971) reflects his apocalyptic-sounding moments of the demise of the man of modernity that he defines as an unstable doubling of transcendental and empirical subjectivity which aspires towards an impossible sovereignty with respect to knowledge, acquired by the human sciences. Yet, while promulgating an essential insight of how power relations sustain and confine what they seek to control, Foucault assumes the concept of (hu)man as a universal term, and thus, overlays, if not overuses, on multiple forms of investigation. As a result, this urges for a reconceptualization of human, evoking the coming of a new configuration.

The material turn takes this urge as a starting point while taking into account this crumbling of the conceptual foundations of humanism that Foucault anticipates. According to Bergthaller, the project of the material turn is “a redescription of the world that dissolves the singular figure of the human subject, distinguished by unique properties (soul, reason, mind, free will or intentionality), into the dense web of material relations in which all beings are enmeshed” (2014, p. 37). By doing so, it activates a turn to matter that acknowledges the dynamics of matter in terms of multiplicity of meanings and possibilities and recognizes that time and space are nonlinear. Past, present and future are enmeshed in one and so does space in which local and global cannot be segregated.

The material turn, therefore, rethinks humans as being far less sovereign than the humanist traditions have expressed. It insists that inanimate matter is much more than inert as Marxist materialism sustained. The material turn, in forms of new materialisms, considers matter as having qualities that are formerly seen as exclusive to humans. This includes complex self-organization, reflexivity, consciousness and the capacity to act spontaneously, and thus, matter cannot be reduced as purely dependent on external determination.

This insight can be summarized as matter possesses agency, which is emergent and distributed rather than being the property of concrete, isolable entities. The new materialisms see matter as entity, who manifests itself in distributed networks in which it is embedded. According to Coole and Frost (2010), the new materialists attempt to articulate consequences for the humanistic disciplines of selected major transformation that scientific knowledge of the world has undergone over the past decades. This includes complexity studies, systems biology, and cognitive sciences to name a few. As they explain, the new materialists are trying to bring the humanities out of their ignorance towards this development. This ignorance has been licensed by the linguistic idealism of absolute power of language.

This is indeed an aspect that the new materialists share with ecocritics. However, their distinction is also obvious. According to Phillips (2003), ecocriticism continues to rely on outdated conception of nature and ecology while the new materialisms favor the newer scientific models that diminish the old concepts. In other words, the new materialists consider nature as something beyond linguistic construction, stripping of its metaphysical halo that encourages one to think that nature is a merely similarity of the whole. They manifest the recognized absurdity of lamenting abstract alienation of humans from the rest of nature and indicate the ways in which humans have been entangling and enmeshing in material processes that are often overlooked in order to secure human mastery. By doing so, humans are reminded of the fact that their mastery is nothing but illusion and matter possesses both irreducible multiplicity and unpredictability.

In pursuing this direction, the new materialists pose challenges to traditional environmentalisms, especially the biocentric worldviews that contemporary ecocriticism relies. It is significant not to assimilate and replace nature with matter and leave them uninvestigated, and thus, disregard interdependency of matter in the entanglement of the material world of nature. As Bennett concludes that it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces and forms, as these

are encounters that are capable of chasing the fantasy of human mastery and highlighting the materiality of all in order to “expose a wider distribution of agency and reshape the self and its interests” (2010, p. 122).

Considering in this sense, the new materialisms offer no more ethical guidance than the attribution of intrinsic value to all living beings of deep ecology. However, by deeply examining the concept of humans and its relationship to nonhuman matter, the new materialisms move beyond merely resurfacing this value. Rather, they bring forth the question of how exactly human and nonhuman values and their agency should be mutually considered and weighted on the ethical scales. Their energy has been spending on either crossing established boundaries between bodies, subjects and contexts or blurring them (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 16). One of the predominant efforts is none other than Karen Barad and her conceptualization of agential realism.

Agential Realism: Literary Approach for Representation of Nonhuman Nature

To enlarge literary lenses to include nonhuman characters into literary analysis, the new materialist notion of agential realism grounds the framework of this paper. Agential realism, as Barad (2007) introduces, refers to the realm of responding agency in which all kinds of agents emerge through and in their relations with each other in a spatial-temporal dimension.

Agential realism foregrounds a new ontology in which everything is intertwined in an intra-activity of knowing, valuing and becoming. Intra-action, according to Barad, involves the mutual constitution of material-discursively entangled agencies. It signifies a phenomenon of inseparability of matter and discourse, objects and subjects, and texts and contexts. As Barad (2007) explains,

Materiality is a discursive performance of the world, but discursive practices are not reducible to human-based actions. Matter does not serve as a mere support for discourse, nor is it merely the end product of human-based citational practices. Rather, discursive practices are specific material configurations/(re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted. That is, discursive practices are ongoing agential intra-actions of the world. Meaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility. In its casual intra-activity, “part” of the world becomes determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another “part” of the world (p. 173).

Therefore, in contrast to the term ‘interaction’, which, assumes that there are separate individual entities that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through the process of intra-action. Therefore, agency in the framework of agential realism is neither human identity-determined nor human capacity of acting independently. It is neither restricted to human action, human intentionality, nor is it something humans grant to nonhuman entities. Rather, as Barad puts it, “agency is a matter of intra-acting, that is, agency is an enactment, it is not something someone has.” (1996, p. 183). This is to say, an

agency of intra-action is determined by the abilities to respond and contribute of humans and nonhumans including material matter in the circle of intra-relationships between them and as Freitas and Sinclair argues, “language performs through a material reconfiguring of the world, rather than replicating, modeling or coding a material entity outside of it” (2014, p. 49). Consequently, an agency can only emerge in and through relations to one another. Drawing from this, intra-activities are considered in narratives by equally investigating into co-existence of humans and nonhumans, whose presence is often relegated as irrelevant and insignificant, as Derrida (2002) also points out that the response-ability has traditionally been denied to nonhumans, particularly animals, and has collectively been ignored by humans, regardless of their capacity of returning a gaze. Accordingly, agency of intra-action always consists of response-ability and substantial reciprocity, existed within and belonged to all kinds of entities.

Reconceptualization of Agency

The concept of agency has been problematic in both postcolonial and environmental perspectives, especially in terms of being closely related to anthropocentrism and oppression of otherness. Spivak (1988), for instance, argues that others may speak but their speech is often pre-positioned, and thus not being heard by those in power. This is a problem of the colonized voices in which self-expression of the colonized is restricted by the process of conquest and colonization. In the similar manner, colonized/displaced ecosystems are also in this subaltern position and even receive a worse treatment due to the lack of wording communication that humans generally recognize as intelligible. This problem becomes more severe when nonhumans in question are represented as being proximate to humans. As Armstrong (2008) states, nonhumans are seen as dependent actors to human characters. Therefore, when talking about nonhuman agency, the allegation of anthropomorphism always comes along, eliminating possibilities of nonhuman’s own capacity for choices and decision-making, because these abilities have been often considered as the uniqueness of human beings. This matches the argument of Latour (2005) that the concept of agency has essentially defined property of persons that has been created to separate humans from the rest of nature.

Additionally, as Huggan and Tiffen argue, this concept of agency “is itself open to charges of anthropocentrism” (2015, p. 208). Drawing from their analysis of Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, they affirm that “if we define agency less by the essentialist capacities apparently required to effect change than by the effecting of change itself, we have not only a less anthropocentric but also a less circular definition of agency” (2015, p. 208). To support the urge of the reconceptualization of agency, they relate their argument to Philip Armstrong and they claim that:

Many people (outside the West, but in it too) have now started to deconstruct seemingly obvious claims about the privileged status of the human, in contradistinction to the animal, as the source of agency in the world; what is needed therefore is a reconsideration of the term and concept of agency itself (2015, p. 208).

Contributing to redefining the concept of agency, aiming to decenter anthropocentrism, agential realism provides approaches to recognize the similarities and the mutual interdependency as much

as to reconsider difference-ness between human species and nonhumans through which their existence relies on each other. Barad (2007, 2012) refers to this process as “spacetime-mattering”—the material-discursive entanglement. Moreover, the argument that Anton W. Amo proposes in his ignored philosophical work, *On the Impassivity of Human Mind*, that the presence of one exists from the presences of others (as cited in Hountondji, 1983, p. 120), seem to be quite convincing. It is unlikely possible for humans to define themselves without others, becoming independent. Even if defining something or someone seems to be an act of oppression or colonization, it also implies commitment and connection between them, leading to the notion that something or someone is important and necessary for another to give efforts to do so. This notion gives ways to challenge and question the human hierarchical separability from the rest of nature, oppressing nonhuman others as instruments, in order to control and exploit them. Instead, human presence is defined and defining by the presence of nonhumans, as Rothfield (1990) argues in terms of “a decentered form of explanation” (p. 124) that acknowledges human engagements with its surroundings helping contour the sense of self. Thus, this means that nonhuman others also possess power to influence human beings in forms of the response-ability.

Accordingly, agency is reconceptualized to be performatively fluid and always in the process of becoming, because it emerges from within every entity, especially when they participate in action, and relationships, enacting or entangling in the material world. Indeed, agency relates to “making meaning” as Allen argues that “[agency is] used [...] to retain notions of human participation in the production of meaning without suggesting more absolute notions such as originality, genius or uniqueness” (2011, p. 217). Yet, this also means that agency is about “activities” that, in turn, encourage meaning to be made. This is the rise of the new-material turn in language construction, a material-discursive entanglement in which languages act as mediators between human and nonhuman agencies, highlighting their existence by producing boundaries and properties of things, grasping the materiality surrounding humans, and at the same time, material matter provides space for the boundaries and properties to perform, and thus shapes human languages and knowledge. Without both of them, there is not “thing”. This is how the world is made and comprehended.

Instead of being solely tied to human possession, the concept of agency is transformed to be a matter of response-ability, resistance and survival. It is a product of material-discursive entanglement and is very significant for environmental ethics and other ethical implications that relate to the underprivileged and disadvantaged, regardless of whether they are nonhumans or humans, due to the fact that it gives crucial challenges to the separation of humans from the rest of nature, and thus destabilizes the absolute superiority of human culture over nature that results in environmental degradation and the lack of compassion and considerateness towards others who are in fact companions. Consequently, this reconceptualized agency offers ways to understand the roles of humans and nonhumans in a new light that may be able to contribute to a sustainable future: an ontological-epistemological vision of reality that is constituted as a dis/continuous process that considers matter and meaning as active actors. Their embodiments and forms co-establish and co-emerge into a unitary domain of co-existence.

Emergence of Environmental Ethics in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

To apply the literary lens of agential realism in the literary analysis of *Yellow-Yellow*, both human and nonhuman characters are centralized. The first actor is Zilayefa, the protagonist whose focalization reflects the worsen situations of the Niger Delta in the novel and leads the narratives. Zilayefa, known as "Yellow" in her community, is a Greek-Nigerian girl who has brought up in a small village in which oil pipes have been constructed through and thus she has first-hand experiences of the environmental destruction, caused by the leaked crude oil. Zilayefa indeed perceives as well as assigns meanings to the environmental elements and connected them to the way in which her suffering and the environmental degradation is nothing but the same. As seen in the following excerpt,

My thoughts would have my heart thumping with anxiety, as if I had been entwined in fishing net and throw into the murky waters of the River Nun; each movement, each attempted breath, forced me down to a lifeless state of the bottom of the river. I had to come up with something to do to stay alive. (Agary, 2009, pp. 34-35)

This excerpt reveals Zilayefa's suffering after she realizes that she cannot leave the dying village with Sergio, her Spanish pursuer and is in fact abandoned by him. Being desperate to leave the village, Zilayefa compares her feeling with the material characteristics of the murky waters of the River Nun. This dark, oil-spilled, toxic stream of waters is lifeless. With toxic elements, the water is dangerous for touching and consumption. Zilayefa metaphorizes the murky water as her village that is slowly forced to become the death land both socially through the neglected government and physically through the crude oil spilled from the oil pipelines that prevents fruitful cultivation and "moves the wealth of beneath [her] land into the pockets of the selected few who rule[s] Nigeria" (Ageray, 2006, p. 39). At the same time, however, this metaphor demonstrates the power of the murky waters of the River Nun by relying its connotation with the materiality of the waters that are very much contaminated. The murky waters therefore performatively become agential actors who also sharp Zilayefa's perception with its own material narrativity from within.

The agency of waters in *Yellow-Yellow* does not only help represent Zilayefa's feeling when they are covered by the leaked oil, but it also allows Zilayefa to express a dangerous situation that has been replaced the life of the Niger Delta.

The water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines ... [L]ands claimed by massive floods during the rainy season, the earth slowly melting into the revers. Women rowed their canoes farther and farther away to find land for farming. (Agary, 2006, p. 39)

Here, Agary employs the pollution of waters to emphasize the fact that streams of waters or rivers are indeed powerful and essential for life. They are able to influence the well-being of people in the village, determining their abilities to cultivate food supply. When the waters are clean and nontoxic, the flood-covered land can be re-cultivated after the rainy season. Unfortunately, in the case of Zilayefa's village around the Niger Delta, the oil-covered flood forever damages farmlands

and thus completely destroys the lives of the villagers, including Zilayefa's mother, Ina Binaebi. She suffers from this outcome that is always ignored and cannot do anything but to accept it.

Agary emphasizes the narrative power of water agency further when Zilayefa makes meaning of the Atlantic Ocean on her trip in Lagos with her friends, Lolo and Kamal.

Everyone was aware of how hungry the Atlantic was, and only the foolish ventured into her belly. There were stories of children sucked into her ravenous stomach as they played around the shore. Some were lucky and she spat them out, back into our world. The others remained in her belly, never to be seen again, joining the number of human sacrifices that sought, seemingly without success, to appease the Atlantic. (Agary, 2006, p. 91)

Drawing from this, Agary indeed thinks of the waters as vibrant matter that has its own agency and stories within itself. The waters are storied matter on whom Zilayefa relies in order to construct her perception, both comparing and contrasting her life and social-religious situations with them. The waters partially have power over her by shaping her ideas, and thus, entangling in space-time dimension with Zilayefa, establishing an intra-relationship between them. The more the waters are polluted, the darker Zilayefa considers her life and those surrounding her. This mirrors Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's claim that "the people and their environment have been subjected to violent suppressions by the oil companies, and the inconsiderateness of the federal government has not helped matters" (2013, p. 112). *Yellow-Yellow* becomes the reflection of Agary's grief for the dying land and suffering people that have been forced to displace and dislocate from the ecological sphere they call home.

Agary undoubtedly chooses to employ the agency of water to stress the aspect of displacement in her novel because water is one of the most essential natural elements that humans need for living and surviving. Waters constitute the life of human force and with that, they are capable of bringing both joy, constructing a life space, and sadness, transforming the space of life into a land of death. Water needs to be guarded in order to guarantee human survival. Yet, in the Niger Delta, the water supplies have not been monitored and maintained. Rather, they have been degraded and considered as less superior than the crude oil investment. As an outcome, the water supplies in the Niger Delta are contaminated by crude oil, and therefore, the local villagers have been suffered and so do the fictional villagers in the novel. Representing through these images, an ethical consideration for the Niger Delta should regard the protection of clean, non-toxic waters. Waters as part of nature will then bring joy, creating living space as well as place for childhood memories. As Zilayefa delivers her nostalgia in the novel,

[T]he images of laughter from my childhood: the moonlit nights that wrapped us as children, when we sang, clapped and danced through games, pretending to tell each other's fortunes, naming the species of food or dodging possession by a water spirit. The day I spent with my mother on her farm before oil finally swallowed it up. (Agary, 2006, p. 41)

Apart from the problem of oil leaked from the oil pipelines, resulting in the destruction of farmlands and rivers, Agary also presents the problematic deforestation in *Yellow-Yellow*. Zilayefa meets her first love interest, Sergio when he comes to her village for his business deals with a villager, named Tarilabo. Sergio is an antique furniture dealer from Spain. He and Tarilabo go out to survey “potential of the area” (Agary, 2006, p. 27) in which they are interested. Even if Agary never explicitly indicates what they do with the potential area, the reader is able to predict that they are looking for beautiful and valuable woods for their furniture business. As narrated, Sergio and Tarilabo consider woods, products of plants in the forest, as commodities. Plants’ existence as pristine matter is transformed and oppressed as “things” for sale. This reflects an argument of Sunny Awhefeada that the Niger Delta has been devastated and disrupted by the exploitation and exploration by foreigners, aided by local conquistadors (2013, p. 98). To subvert this notion, Agary reveals the agency of plants, resurrecting its value not as commodities, but as a solution to support Zilayefa after leaving her village.

I soon started looking for plants that resembled the ones girls in our village claimed were used to “wash out” *belle*. Old GRA houses were surrounded by all kinds of trees and plants, some going wild along people’s fences, and I had seen a few that looked like the acclaimed ones for washing out *belle*. (Agary, 2006, p. 176)

Instead of consulting Dr. George for modern medication, Zilayefa decides to turn to the plants to cope up with her problem. The plants play an important role in the traditional abortion method of her village and even if this method is claimed to be much riskier than the modern one offered by Dr. George, Zilayefa still insists to undergo through it. This is how Agary presents to the reader the interconnectedness between Zilayefa and her environmental root. With its medical capabilities, the plants act as mediators between her and her homeland. Zilayefa remembers the physical body of the plants and this shows that she never forgets her own knowledge from the village. They are always connected and this connection is strengthened further when Zilayefa takes the leaves of the plants. As she narrates, “my being drifted into a river. I could hear the waves slowly chasing after each other; some lapped over my stomach, while others collided with canoes at the shore” (Agary, 2006, p. 177). The effects of the plants remind her of her time when she visits the island “Wokiri”, the land where “[children] could do whatever [they] wanted without the adults disturbing [them]” (Agary, 2006, p. 24), and thus, once again bring her close to the village where she comes from and is always in her heart.

Another environmental agency that Agary underlines in this novel is voice. According to Bernadette Baker (1999), voice is a concept often presumed to be a product of identity and representative of already recognizable group formation. What make voice a product of identity, however, are lungs, vocal folds and air. According to information from Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, without these three, no voice or sound can be produced. This is because diaphragm action pushes air from the lungs through the vocal folds that, in turn, produce a periodic train of air pulses. This pulse train is shaped by the resonances of the vocal tract. The basic resonances, known as vocal formants, can be changed by the action of the articulators to produce distinguishable voice sounds such as vowel sounds. This process creates individuality in

voice and it seems that Agary surfaces this knowledge in *Yellow-Yellow* in which Zilayefa feels attachment towards others from hearing their voices. For instance, Zilayefa is attached to Sergio due to his voice, as she narrates, “I enjoyed the sound of his voice—so much that sometimes I concentrated more on it than on what he said. But at this point, that was it. I was not in love” (Agary, 2006, p. 23). Zilayefa also feels attached to Lolo because of her voice. “At that point, I liked her already. She had a low, husky voice” (Agary, 2006, p. 52). Zilayefa, moreover, says that when she reads her mother’s letter, she remembers her voice (Agary, 2006, p. 79). All of these point to the agency of voice, emerged through a material-discursive entanglement between lungs, vocal folds, air and meanings of identity. This agency of voice, therefore, determines Zilayefa’s contacts with other characters. Moreover, the agency of voice is environmental humanistic, as it emerges from human body, as well as it is a product of air, which is a natural element.

Conclusion

All mentioned human and nonhuman actors co-constitute an intra-relationship in which their intra-action entangles to one another. Kaine Agary purposefully emphasizes that the life of humans and the life of natural environment are interdependent through the fictional world in which the agency of water, plants, voice and Zilayefa herself have been redefined and mutually equipped with power of narrativity. All agencies are never passive. The nonhumans possess agency that is as powerful as that of humans. As seen in the novel, their intra-relationship is mutually constructed by all active agencies and can never be neither broken nor separated. As the novel represents, environmental degradation and human oppression, therefore, are intensified hand in hand in the Niger Delta in favor of capitalism and benefits for few people in power. If these issues continue to be neglected, the Niger Delta might literally become the land of death in which nobody want to live. The land would become fruitless like its fictional avatar. No more fish would be found in the rivers. This is the era of subverting anthropocentrism in which human perceptions should also involve and be considerate to the lives of their own kind and those beyond our species. This is after all the land for everyone and so does the Niger Delta.

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