

MAMMY WATER AND WOMEN'S AGENCY IN KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW*

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Abstract

This article explores the efforts of Kaine Agary to challenge the popular representation of mixed-race women as Mammy water, a derogatory identity that often robs these women of upward mobility and social integration in his novel *Yellow-Yellow*. In doing this, it analyzes the text within the framework of postcolonial practice of hybridity, especially as theorized by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. The article asserts that social marginalization or exclusion of mixed-race women often deprives them access to material comfort and in order to mitigate the harsh realities of the Nigerian economy and stigmatization as hyper-sexual mammy water, they sometimes self-consciously assume the persona of the latter. While performing the identity of the Mammy water, they strive to attenuate the dominant narratives of hyper-sexuality and moral decadence, through a deconstructive adoption of conformity, through which they attempt to recovering their economic and subjective agency.

Keywords: mammy water, moral decadence, hyper-sexuality, hybridity, stigmatization.

Introduction

There is no denying that Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* narrativizes the environmental impacts of oil exploration in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria and spotlights the politics and corruption of Niger-Delta militants' activism. These are some of the dominant thematic concerns of many critical responses to the novel. While these perspectives are legitimate foci of the novel, it is important to acknowledge the text's efforts in re-conceptualizing women's agency. In doing this, Agary's novel centers its story on two light-skinned women who are products of interracial parents. In part because of their light skin, and in part as a result of being considered extremely attractive, they are labeled "Mammy water." Mammy water is an ambiguous description in that, on the one hand, it emphasizes the women's beauty and on the other, it constructs them as being morally depraved pariahs. Based on the novel's cultural and social contexts, and from Niger-Delta's popular imagination, mammy water's interpretation exists on a spectrum of signification that extends from privilege to terror. One of such interpretations with which women of dual racial parentage are labeled is "prostitute." This perspective has insinuated itself into critical commentary on the novel to the extent that such commentaries unwittingly echo the prejudice of the popular imagination. However, a thorough scrutiny of *Yellow-Yellow* shows that these women often have to contend with the harsh economic conditions of urban centers, where their choices are usually limited. Therefore, even though they engage in relations that border on transactional sex, the novel complicates this experience by showing that it is often a difficult choice that has more or less been made for them on the one hand. On the other, the novel portrays this sexual liaison not simply as a manifestation of moral corruption but a deliberate effort to survive in a society prejudiced against these light-skinned women through a practice. Therefore, by retelling the story of the mammy water, *Yellow-Yellow* re-writes women's agency.

Yellow-Yellow is not the only novel that has explored the existential realities of women of different racial backgrounds. A few other novels contemporaneous with it have such characters. For example, there is Sheri in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and

Jessamy in Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl*, through whom the authors address the struggle over the biracial body as an exotic spectacle (*Icarus Girl*) and challenge the over-idealization of female attractiveness (*Everything*). In the case of Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, these women (Zilayefa and Emem) instrumentalize their "yellow" complexion to survive penury and alienation. Through such an act, they appropriate the meta-narrative of prostitution, which they could not subvert through disavowal, but which can be attenuated by redeploying it for economic survival. Precisely because of these female characters' conscious assumption of the persona of the Mammy water, which implies a deconstructive imitation of subjection, postcolonial theory, and in particular Homi Bhabha's theorization of hybridity, are employed as a hermeneutical tool to trace the subjects' efforts to destabilize primal sites of power.

Niger-Delta and the concept of postcolonies and postcolony

It is necessary to stress that no matter the discursive convenience of the term "postcolony," one should imagine "postcolonies" rather than postcolony in order to resist the seduction of homogenizing postcolonial societies. For example, the hierarchy of the races that organizes many societies in the Caribbean world does not necessarily apply to the Niger-Delta in Nigeria, which did not experience a slave economy on the scale that the Caribbean Islands did. Also, mixed-race people in the Niger-Delta do not necessarily possess economic and class privilege in contrast to some Caribbean territories where the darker one is, the less access one tended to have to economic and political power. In the Niger-Delta as the novel has shown, biracial subjects do not necessarily possess social, economic, and political privilege primarily because they do not constitute a class and because there is no white or creolized European presence that could establish and maintain strict racial and class boundaries.

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* has attracted robust critical opinions, making the novel one of the dominant ones in the first two decades of the millennium. For example, Michael Janis argues that the terms used for biracial children, such as "African-profits," "born-troways," "ashawo-pickins," and "father-unknowns," not only deepen the social marginalization of mixed-race children, but also stress the "cultural conflicts of the colonial situation" (325). In "The Niger Delta Region and the Woman's Predicament: A Study of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*," E. D. Simon emphasizes women's vulnerability and the fact that they suffer the effect of environmental degradation more than any other group of people (158). Simon further contends that young girls and women who are unable to find jobs or education "find succor in the hands of foreigners who exploit their sexuality" (157). Regarding biracial children, Simon also addresses the strings of pejorative labels with which biracial children are called, including being stigmatized as HIV/AIDS patients (159). In addition, Simon appropriates the notion of "tragic mulatto" to designate the predicament of mixed-race women in *Yellow-Yellow* and in the Ijaw community (159).

For Charles Feghabo, in his essay entitled "Inverting Otherness in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*," reckless oil exploration that continues to impact the environment negatively has exacerbated the living conditions in the Niger-Delta and women seem to be more vulnerable because of their dependence on land for farming and the waters for fishing (319). Faghabo further argues that the reckless exploitation of resources in the Niger-Delta has forced women to "reconstruct their endangered humanity through unorthodox and debasing means of livelihood that sometimes include prostitution" (320). He contends that Western education and conscious mutual support of rural and urban women are the only strategies that can mitigate the negative effects of gender oppression because

both classes of women are “united in their subalternity” (331). However, according to Solomon Azumurana in his article, “Freud’s ‘Penis Envy,’ Lacan’s the Desire to be the Other Nigerian Feminist Aesthetics: Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Children of the Eagle* and Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*,” women’s agency is contingent on appropriating the space of absent family members in order to survive (151). In other words, realizing their precarious circumstances, these characters play multiple roles in order to navigate the inhospitable social conditions in which they live.

These critical perspectives have been helpful in rethinking women’s agency in *Yellow-Yellow*. For example, Janis’s assertion that the use of pejorative labels for biracial women tends to alienate them is valid especially since the women’s access to equitable wealth distribution becomes increasingly diminished. However, Feghabo’s claim that these women sometimes resort to prostitution validates societal perception of the women as morally compromised. However, such an argument does not emphasize the unique experience of mixed-race women as outcasts. It is precisely because of the peculiar predicament of biracial women that it becomes necessary to situate them in the marginal world of the Mammy water since they are doubly marginalized, first as women and second as biracial women. It is their attempt to grapple with the smothering economic world of the city that they self-consciously place themselves in the domain of the “Other,” which is that domain of Mammy water. In order to show how the novel achieves this task, it is necessary to look into Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, whose argument relies on the paradox of undermining a dominant command by appropriating it.

Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity

Bhabha’s hybridity is based mainly on the context of the discursive encounter between the colonizer and the colonized in India. Its significance lies in the local population’s ability to subvert colonial discourse – in this case, the Bible – through mimicry of obedience and textual ambivalence that arises from the contamination of the colonial text by the local narrative (107). Bhabha’s theory takes as its model the colonial encounter in which ideological weapons were marshaled for the subjugation of the colony. This point evinces Edward Said’s assertion in *Culture and Imperialism* that the imperial project, through utilized ruthless military might, depended on ideological subjugation of the so-called natives (xii). The colony’s response to imperialism, according to Said, did not always take the form of violent uprisings but also employed the cultural medium of the novel to challenge the colonial representation of the colonized (xii). Bhabha claims that hybridity implies “a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledge enters upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition” (114). Since colonial authority’s cultural apparatus depends on radical difference or “Otherness” of the colonized, hybridity intervenes in this encounter by destabilizing the very basis of difference (113).

In contrast to outright nationalist anti-colonial uprisings whose key aim was to achieve self-rule, hybridity is a displacement of the colonial authority. It projects colonial and local symbolic systems in an ambivalent manner that resists totalization or dissolution. Therefore, hybridity sets itself inside and outside the juridical machinery, a process through which it ruptures colonial desire for totalized representations of both “self” and “other” as immutably different. According to Bhabha, hybridity suggests that “the knowledge of cultural authority may be articulated with forms of ‘native’ knowledge or faced with those discriminated subjects that they must rule but can no longer represent” (115). Its operation is a repetition of order that inheres in a “parodic inhabiting of

conformity that calls into question the legitimacy of the command.” (Butler 382) Bhabha clarifies this repetition further when he argues: “The display of hybridity – its peculiar ‘replication’ – terrorizes authority with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery.” (115) Again, the power of hybridity lies in mimicry of the colonial discourse and not in antagonizing it because antagonizing it simply validates the rules of imperial power. Rather, hybridity parodies difference. Bhabha explains this mimicry as a performative operation of hybridity, stating: “Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the *fixation* of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the authorization of colonial representation” (90; Original emphasis). For Bhabha, therefore, transgressing colonial logic of representation with local episteme and mimicking its articulation of difference produce a camouflage, that inability to achieve absolute difference, that inability to coalesce subjects into totalized sameness or otherness. Hybridity disintegrates “Self” and “Other” into the expression, “less than one and double” (119), an aporia that disrupts fixity.

Bhabha’s idea of hybridity is not without shortcomings, one of which comes from Robert Young’s book, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, in which he argues that postcolonial critics inadvertently re-inscribe the same ideological bias of colonialism into their discourse of postcolonialism (6-19). According to him, the dialectical structure of hybridity “shows that [it] is still repeating its own cultural origins, that it has not slipped out of the mantle of the past, even if . . . hybridity has been deployed against the very culture that invented it in order to justify its divisive practices of slavery and colonial oppression” (25). One factor that allows Young to make this claim is that Bhabha’s theory is situated directly within the context of colonization. However, despite this context in which hybridity is set, it is also a paradigm that lends itself to contexts other than colonization in which there is an unequal distribution of power between dominant and dominated groups.

Young’s perspective on hybridity is that the ambiguous tool that postcolonial critics deploy to dismantle colonial power actually re-invents it by reproducing the fiction of domination and subservience. While Young’s observation may have some validity to it, it does not take into account the fact that hybridity disavows literal overcoming of the colonial forces, which is why it centralizes “those discriminated subjects that they [colonial power] must rule but can no longer represent” (Bhabha 115). Moreover, hybridity destabilizes colonial authority, contaminating its discourse that desires conformity of the dominated. As such, it transgresses colonial discourse’s discriminatory representation, so that colonial desire for discursive, racial, and cultural essentialism becomes unattainable. It is an effective model that haunts absolutism but embraces contamination and transgression as can be seen even in the context of the United States where the word “black” becomes a performative and ambivalent affirmation of the irrational one-drop rule (Harper 139). The rest of the article is divided into two: the first section provides an overview of the Mammy water, the social, moral, and cultural pariah, while the second section shows how the characters begin to embrace the extrinsic space of the Mammy water for their survival.

The Mammy Water as a social, moral and cultural pariah

According to Ify Amadiume, stories about the Mammy water are ubiquitous in Africa and African diaspora especially “in communities near rivers, creeks, lagoons, oceans, and lakes (52). She claims that this water goddess “is represented as an enchanting, naked,

beautiful woman who can be seen combing her long hair sitting on a rock in the sea or on the shores. It is also believed that this woman can cause tragic accidents” (52-53). In Nigerian women’s fiction, not all Mammy water characters are created equal; their fictional representations appear to have been informed by specific social, cultural, and political necessities. For example, in her bid to re-conceptualize women’s agency in a modernizing world, Flora Nwapa sets her novels in part against the backdrop of water goddesses that fit the personality of the Mammy water (Amadiume 54). Nwapa’s main characters, such as Efuru (*Efuru*), Amaka (*One is Enough*), Rose (*Women are Different*), and Ona (*The Lake Goddess*), are possessed by the Mammy water (Amadiume 54), through whose influence they confront institutions such as marriage and patriarchy. Mainly because of the defiant temperament of Nwapa’s protagonists, the Mammy water in her novels is a radically re-written one, whose traditional and spiritual power of fertility has been considerably attenuated (Jell-Bahlsen 30-31). Ihuoma of Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* is another brand of Mammy water with a negative reputation. Yet, Nwapa and Amadi’s characters are different from Buchi Emecheta’s symbolic appropriation of Mammy water in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where the protagonist (Nnu Ego) experiences tragic fortunes that testify to women’s precarious position within inflexible traditional societies and indifferent colonial modernizing cities.

Emecheta’s dark-skinned Mammy water (Nnu Ego) represents an aberration in the portrayal of these female characters who are most always light-skinned, as observed by Amadiume that “Nwapa’s Mammy Water is a hybrid, a mulatto, stemming from a colonially derived desire for ‘whiteness’ by colonized African natives” (53). Amadiume observes that the Mammy water of Nwapa’s novels is a Western cultural product that displaces indigenous conceptualization of womanhood (49-50). Similarly, Melody Jue claims that the Mammy water is alien and “does not mark a break with indigenous cosmologies and traditions, but [is] rather a continuation of them (177). Despite Jue’s argument, the Mammy water is contradictory to local conceptualization of womanhood (Amadiume 50). Unlike Amadiume, Madhu Krishnan contends that “the use of the water goddess as a discursive positioning of gender marks a reclamation and re-constitution of precolonial social discourse, standing in sharp contrast to the colonially inflected Judeo-Christian gender dichotomies” (2). To evince Amadiume’s position, the modern fictional model of Mammy water “is characterized by afflictions such as isolation, unhappiness, and disconnection, as the women’s needs become more personal and individualistic” (Amadiume 53). This view is pertinent in that it takes into account the emerging city spaces where survival has become personal, especially because the material conditions of those cities are hostile to startups like the characters in Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*.

Although Nwapa’s protagonist in *Efuru* is light-skinned, the novel does not suggest that she is biracial. However, Amadiume’s submission assumes greater significance once it is applied to a novel like *Yellow-Yellow*, whose protagonist is incontrovertibly biracial. While Nwapa’s and Emecheta’s novels might have more or less valorized the Mammy water, she is mythologized and deprived of human value in the public imagination (Ogunfolabi 41). As Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* has shown, to be a “mammy water” is to be a social problem.

It is for this reason that biracial women of *Yellow-Yellow* are doubly excluded from the city’s commonwealth. Whether a female child is a product of an interracial affair or a product of intra-race relations, as long as the child is economically disadvantaged, she is placed in the harsh economy of the Niger-Delta and might resort to desperate means such

as prostitution in order to make ends meet. The only difference is that mixed-race women are stigmatized because of their assumed lack of strong moral standing.

The implication of this is that, in comparison to biracial women such as Sisi whose Caucasian father supports her despite the fact that her parents are not married, Zilayefa, the protagonist is a lower class woman whose fortunes might have been different had her Greek father taken responsibility for her welfare. While Sisi belongs in the upper class, Zilayefa is forced into the lower class. Within the context of the novel, Mammy water transcends interracial ancestry; Mammy water is a biracial lower class-woman, whose mother was a victim of expatriate sexual tourism. The alienation of biracial girls as Mammy water might have arisen from the stereotypes of the light skin, it is exacerbated by economic disadvantage that puts them in a class where they lack access to the wealth and comfort that someone like Sisi is privileged to have. It is not surprising that the same Sisi who did not lack paternal support but who enjoys full parental support is the same that is a successful entrepreneur. Both Sisi and Zilayefa might have been light-skinned, but by virtue of being an upper-class woman, Sisi transcends the Mammy water while Zilayefa and Emem, considered to be “born-troways” or social rejects, have no choice but to occupy the peripheral domain of the Mammy water. The difference in Sisi and Zilayefa’s social acceptability might have been impacted by chronological age, which means that younger people are more vulnerable to stereotypes. While this observation may be valid, class plays a stronger role in that it relegates young biracial women to the lower rung of social hierarchy.

Therefore, in an attempt to overcome their social disadvantage and negative perceptions as evident in the case of Emem and Zilayefa, mixed-race women have to mimic the Mammy water. They are aware of their society’s negative views of them; but instead of simply disavowing these stereotypes, they self-consciously adopt them in order to cope with their alienation and overturn their harsh economic reality. The story of *Yellow-Yellow* is about how these mixed-race women confront this reality and try to subvert it.

Appropriating the Mammy water for survival

Yellow-Yellow details the adventures of a biracial Ijaw girl named Zilayefa. Dwindling economic prospects in her village pushes her to relocate to the urban city of Port Harcourt. While in Port Harcourt, she meets other biracial women such as Sisi, her host, through whom she secures employment at a hotel. She also meets Emem, a co-worker at the hotel, who mentors her on coping with the pain of societal rejection and introduces her to the strategy of mimicking the “hyper-sexual” mixed-race girl. Although Zilayefa is initially reluctant to follow Emem’s example, she eventually adopts her style. The result is not a triumphant celebration of this method, and neither is it a condemnation. Despite the ambiguity, Zilayefa comes to appreciate the material comfort that comes with playing the Mammy water. At the height of her relationship with a retired Admiral, Zilayefa becomes pregnant. Disappointed by Admiral’s rejection of the pregnancy, Zilayefa becomes more anxious about societal prejudice against mixed-race children than she has ever been. At last, she terminates the pregnancy and feels a sense of self-renewal that coincides with the demise of the then Nigerian military dictator, Sani Abacha.

The connection between mixed-race women and Mammy water is established in Port Harcourt at Zilayefa’s place of work. One of the characters announces her not just as a new employee, but also as Mammy water (*Yellow-Yellow* 71). However, by declaring Zilayefa “mami-wata” to the rest of the employees, the announcer, Mr. Moses, consciously or unconsciously evokes the positive and negative stereotypes about mixed-

race women. As such, his declaration re-inscribes the prejudicial master-narrative about biracial people in that Moses comically pronounces Zilayefa as an addition to a presumably growing presence of biracial women at the hotel. The other person is none other than Emem. The use of the pidgin word “anoda” (another) suggests not only plenitude, but also excess. Although Moses’s announcement may be comical, it does not eliminate the anxiety about this group of young women. In fact, the irony in the anonymous response, “Na’im good for us now” (That is what is good for us now) (71), does not only produce humor, but also deepens the anxiety in the original announcement.

Therefore, Moses’s statement takes on a great significance because it is a repetition of the discriminatory order through which “Self/Other” dichotomy is re-inscribed into the relationship between the people of Port Harcourt and biracial women. In other words, Zilayefa’s introduction by Moses is analogous to Bhabha’s argument that “Colonial authority requires modes of discrimination [and] the right of representation is based on its radical difference” (111). The context of power relations in *Yellow-Yellow* may not have been the colonial one as described by Bhabha, but in that seemingly innocent announcement lies the power that normalizes Moses and others on the one hand and stigmatizes Zilayefa and Emem on the other. The power in Moses’s utterance derives not simply from any juridical or political authority but from the naturalization of difference, as can be seen from the unnamed worker’s sarcastic response. Moses might not have been a dominant figure of power since his role in the plot of the novel is tangential to Zilayefa’s, but his intra-racial identity reinforces the discriminatory discourse that labels mixed-race women as the other: Mammy water.

Compared to Moses whose utterance is so powerful as to the social prejudice against biracial women as Mammy water, Zilayefa laments the social interdiction and silencing that she faces, and could not verbally resist Moses’s pronouncement. However, the novel demonstrates that the interdiction or silence is not absolute, leaving room for subversion of the grand narrative. Zilayefa’s non-verbal reaction is important precisely because it resonates with postcolonial discourse of resistance through the appropriation of the dominant power’s command. Being aware of the social and cultural construction of the Mammy water among the Ijaw people, she states:

I was used to being referred to as a mammy-water. I do not think anyone believed that I was a follower of the water’s mother spirit, but I had one of the qualifying characteristics—my complexion. Mammy waters were said to be beautiful, light-skinned, and possessed a wily charm. It did not mean much to me, but in a place like the hotel reception desk, where they needed generous tips from guests to augment meagre salaries, it was good to have another mammy-water on board. (71)

Zilayefa understands that her own brand of Mammy water emerges as a product of late colonial modernity, especially because the “water’s mother spirit” predated colonization as Amadiume has observed (52). Modern Mammy water is defined as “light-skinned,” a point that Zilayefa underscores in the quotation above. More important, she demonstrates her awareness regarding the stereotypes by stating that “I was used to being referred to as a mammy-water,” and the lack of excitement with which she states this indicates her consciousness that Mammy water generally bears pejorative signification. Despite this, she embraces the mammy water primarily for practical reasons in that she is aware that her wages are meager and would have to depend on gratuity in order to survive, especially in a city like Port Harcourt where she lacks maternal support.

Zilayefa's statements, "I was used to being referred to as a mammy-water," and "it was good to have another mammy-water on board" show that despite her awareness of the stigma of Mammy water in her society, she is willing to adopt this persona, evincing Bhabha's claim about dominated people's ability to undermine the power of the dominant class to represent the colonized by fossilizing differences into a hierarchical system (115). With these excerpts, Zilayefa engages the discourse of Mammy water from the position of a subaltern, whose interior monologue demonstrates a conscious avoidance of antagonistic politics but questions the representational authority of the dominant power. Therefore, Zilayefa's resistance to stigmatization as Mammy water consists in wearing the mask of the Mammy water. Thus, by putting on the mask of the Mammy water, the protagonist displays her awareness of society's portrayal of mixed-race women as outcasts. The effectiveness of this method lies in the protagonist's ironic conformity to this prejudicial representation (Butler 382).

Prior to her migration from the village to Port Harcourt, Zilayefa did not experience the kind of social exclusion that she is subjected to in the city. In the village, being a Yellow-Yellow or Mammy water does not imply a lack of moral uprightness; it is an ideal to aspire to, primarily because it constitutes an identity that can be appropriated in part to achieve material comfort. The mixed-race woman's body becomes an idealized goal to which the village girls can aspire by bleaching their skin (35-36). From the perspectives of other village girls, the light-skinned biracial Zilayefa possesses the body most suitable for transactional sex because for them, the lighter the skin, the more desirable they would be to their clients in the city. It is not surprising that Zilayefa echoes their view when she says that "Some of them would even compare their new complexion to mine, saying how they were almost as yellow as I was" (36). Although the stifling atmosphere of village life has once made Zilayefa to consider relocating to Bonny in order to engage in prostitution with a white clientele (35), it is not until she arrives Port Harcourt that she discovers the connection between the biracial body of the Mammy water and economic rewards.

The desperation of the village girls to survive is not different significantly from Zilayefa's experience in the village, and her view of Port Harcourt as a "promised land" aligns with the girls' perspective. They all have to withstand the lack of choices in the village whose economic prospects have been compromised by oil spillage. They belong in the same class. However, while the girls seem to have determined to succeed through prostitution, it is not until Zilayefa relocates to Port Harcourt that she confronts this reality. The main difference between them is that biracial women constitute a spectacle because of their extremely light skin and are therefore maligned for it while the village girls cannot be confused with mixed-race women, and are spared the negative epithets with which Zilayefa and Emem are stigmatized. Whether biracial or not, both groups of girls decide to put on the persona of the Mammy water, which lacks stable and immutable signification but is simply a costume that can be adorned for the purpose of self-preservation.

As will be clear shortly, playing the role of Mammy water may have economic wealth as its main goal especially in the case of the village girls; however, for the mixed-race women it is also an attempt to subvert society's prejudice against them. Through her friend Emem, she discovers that even though biracial women are generally stigmatized, not everyone is subjected to this treatment, especially those that belong to privileged social classes. For example, Zilayefa tells us that the "yellows" who were products of

marriages between British/Portuguese fathers and Nigerian women were more or less free from prejudice (74). The rest she describes as “*born-troways*, rejected by our fathers, or, worse, nonexistent to them” (74). She clarifies this point as follows:

I never thought much about the circumstance of my existence until I got to Port Harcourt. In Port Harcourt, being yellow defined my interactions with the people I met [...] I came to understand that people had preconceived notions about others of mixed race—they thought we were conceited, promiscuous, undisciplined, and confused. A mixed-race woman in a position of power must have gotten there because of her looks [...] We were products of women of easy virtue who did not have morals to pass on to their children. (74)

Although while introducing Zilayefa Moses avoids these derogatory epithets, he draws attention to the Niger-Delta imaginary regarding the “otherness” of biracial women. As a result, Zilayefa is conscious that she lives in a society that elevates her looks above her humanity and defines her by her skin tone than by her qualities of industry and diligence. Her initial acceptance of the Mammy water identity functions as a performative repetition of Moses’ grand narrative (Butler 382), and it is through this performance that she constructs a counter-narrative in form of ironic acceptance of Mammy water’s identity (Bhabha 112). Therefore, it becomes crucial to explore further, how she applies the same strategy to undermining the derogatory descriptions of mixed-race women as promiscuous and immoral, whom her society believes achieve upward mobility only through alleged unregulated sexuality (*Yellow-Yellow* 74).

Yellow-Yellow, therefore, is also an attempt to deconstruct the prejudice expressed in the excerpt above through a subtle evocation of Zilayefa’s mother and her family background generally. Zilayefa’s mother, Ina Binaebi, was an innocent eighteen-year-old girl who had moved to Port Harcourt “with visions of instant prosperity” (7). Prior to coming to Port Harcourt, she had completed her secondary education and passed her school-leaving examinations. The novel makes one understand that Binaebi is no different from any young person who has experienced poverty in their village and hopes for financial success in the city. The fact that she had passed her examinations is a testimony to her diligence. The narrator also makes it clear that her mother was a victim of sex exploitation, which is why she describes her father as follows: “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 and would have told her anything to have her company. The woman he chose was my mother, a young and naïve eighteen-year old” (7). Binaebi was ecstatic that she had found a potential husband but after a few weeks, the man left her in the lurch. Although she was broken after the Greek man left without notice, Zilayefa’s mother refuses to marry and instead devotes all her attention to raising her only daughter well. This obscure piece of history contradicts the dominant negative narrative about mixed-race children as products of mothers who lack moral strength and who could not instill discipline in their children. The novel makes it clear that Zilayefa might have come from a poor background, but poverty did not push her mother to socially unacceptable practices.

Similarly, Emem’s father is a photographer while her mother sells cosmetics. According to the narrator, their businesses are small, but are doing well. From Emem and Zilayefa’s humble family backgrounds, the stereotypes of mixed-race children in the context of this novel are not based on factual accuracy. Even though Emem’s mother is the biracial

daughter of an Ijaw woman and a Portuguese trader (73), the fact that Emem is light-skinned makes the Mammy water stereotype inevitable. Instead, the stereotypes simply efface their morally strong backgrounds and then homogenize all lower-class mixed-race women as lacking propriety. These negative views might be factually inaccurate. They have the potential to jeopardize these women's social acceptability and access to opportunities. Being the first time that she has experienced such social exclusion, Zilayefa has to rely on Emem to navigate the hostile world of the city.

Zilayefa's resistance in this regard depends largely on Emem's tutelage, which she adopts for the rest of the novel. This relationship becomes necessary for this protégé precisely because her previous life in the village, mostly devoid of prejudices against biracial women, has not prepared her for the discriminatory attitude (74-75). As to be expected, Zilayefa's initial efforts are not confident ones, which is why she admits that she employs Emem's style reluctantly (75). However, she gradually learns that whatever people think of her because of her skin color does not matter, an attitude that she tries to perfect throughout the plot of the novel.

However, the lessons intensify as Zilayefa moves from discounting negative comments to embracing the supposed sexual charm of the Mammy water. As for Emem, she has perfected the performance by exploiting men's desire. In fact, according to Zilayefa, Emem concocts "tear-inducing stories" about her parents' supposed privation in order to get more money from her many admirers (128). The fact that Emem makes up the stories emphasizes the performative element of her action, a strategy that she bequeaths to Zilayefa. For example, Emem alerts Zilayefa to a potential sexual interest from one of their customers at the hotel named Retired Admiral Kenneth Alaowei Amalayefa. As a reluctant student, Zilayefa resists Emem's suggestion because she is comfortable materially. She also argues that she saves most of her salary and that she is preoccupied with home and school work to be able to accommodate an affair with Admiral.

In terms of Zilayefa's verbal and physical reaction to Admiral's proposal, she ostensibly opposes this impending relationship. On meeting Admiral, she stutters, her heart races, and admits that she is nervous (130). Nevertheless, a scrutiny of her unconscious reaction to Admiral shows that she has actually embraced the relationship. For instance, she compares her earlier date, Sergio, with Admiral and says as follows:

When I met Sergio, I was desperate and that undoubtedly affected the clarity of my thought processes. I had looked at my options and settled on absconding with a man, not minding his age. Now, faced with the hot pursuit of an older man, I was not quite sure how to handle myself. Yes, I was charming, and I knew how to flirt, I had never had the courage to go beyond flirting. I had a feeling there was nowhere to run or hide from Admiral, and I was not sure I wanted to. I was curious about this experience, the comfort that Emem had hinted at. (132)

In this passage, Zilayefa admits that her desperation to emigrate from the village must have forced her to initiate the unfortunate date with Sergio. She analyzes that encounter as an expedient choice, at the very moment that Admiral shows interest in her. Beneath this subtle self-flagellation is the dilemma: whether to accept or reject Admiral's advances, since she states clearly that she is unprepared for having sex with Admiral, but admits the possibility of doing it. The fact that she states that she has never had the courage to go beyond flirting contradicts popular narratives about biracial women as

hypersexual. But she is able to overcome the dilemma by hinting at her curiosity about sexual experience and the lure of material comfort.

Emem's mentorship of Zilayefa reaches a climax at the point that she prepares her for sexual intercourse with Admiral, convincing her that "the pain of the first time is worth the pleasures of a lifetime" (133). Although Zilayefa seems to be reluctant by complaining about the man as being "old enough to be my father" (133), Emem assures her that Admiral's age is not a factor, and in what seems to be the last words of guidance says, "My dear, if you like him, go ahead and enjoy yourself. You only live once!" (133). By confirming that Admiral is a handsome old man and that he likes his smile (133), Zilayefa's reluctance simply disappears and is ready to deploy and perfect the skills that Emem has mastered already. She is gradually becoming the Mammy water.

When Zilayefa becomes troubled after receiving a cash gift from Admiral, it takes Emem's support to reassure her. Emem argues that her fear is misplaced because the anticipated sexual relationship with Admiral is a practice that has been socially normalized (141), even among people who are products of intra-racial affairs. In other words, it is hypocritical to label biracial women as promiscuous when in fact, transactional sex is practiced by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. She also makes Zilayefa understand that mixed-race women occupy lower rung on the social ladder and should not compare themselves with privileged characters like Lolo (Zilayefa's official mentor), whom Emem describes as "old money" (141). Emem says as follows:

"Do you think you are Lolo. Lolo has a name. She is from old money. She can afford to sit on her high horse and pass judgment on people because she has not experienced hardship. Even then, I don't think she is totally innocent... She must have had one or two of these affairs. Get yourself together. Save your money. If you save enough, you will not have to worry about working to be comfortable when you are in the university... Do you want to be asking Sisi for every little thing you need? You need your own cash, my dear." (141)

In this excerpt, Emem educates Zilayefa on their marginal status as Mammy water and stresses the need to strive for material comfort. Her arguments rest on two points: their relative social obscurity and the reality of economic survival. Yet, despite the series of doubts, Zilayefa goes through with the plan. Even when she worries about her mother's disapproving voice not to "spoil herself," she says that "I *reasoned* that she was far away, and there was no way that she could know" (144). From this point onwards, she takes advantage of Admiral's cash flow. The only thing that stops the flow is the pregnancy, which she removes.

The significance of these women's strategy of resistance lies in the fact that their biracial status does not necessarily precondition them to marginality. Rather, their marginal status and the stereotype of hyper-sexuality are socially constructed. Therefore, when they respond to such stereotypes by ignoring people's prejudice and by deploying their bodies, they might have confirmed the stereotypes. However, at the same time, they are simply playing that role through parodic conformity. Their performance of the Mammy water's hyper-sexuality is largely effective because it is also analogous to what Jameson calls a stylistic mask in his elaboration of pastiche (16), which suggests that no identity precedes its articulation. It is for this reason that the village girls, as stated earlier, can put on the

mask of the Mammy water by lightening their skin and thereby, improving their economic prospects through transactional sex (*Yellow-Yellow* 35-36).

Moreover, Agari's *Yellow-Yellow* may have been strictly concerned with the plight of mixed-race women, it has also rewritten Bhabha's theory of hybridity. The novel shows that Bhabha's enthusiasm about the power of hybridity may not be replicated absolutely in all contexts where dominated subjects challenge dominant authorities. While Bhabha has shown that dominant power is not absolute, *Yellow-Yellow* has demonstrated as well that deconstructing power of hybridity is not absolute or seamless either. Zilayefa's hesitation about performing the Mammy water testifies not only to the provisional limits of performance, but also to the tentativeness of dominance. Precisely because her place in the hierarchy of power is never implacably oppositional (Bhabha 109), her resistance must necessarily be agonistic rather than antagonistic (Bhabha 109). Zilayefa might have had an uncomfortable relationship with the mask of the Mammy water, Emem in her own case, wears the mask so comfortably that her performance blurs the margins between the mask and herself as a subject. She exists in an inter-subjective continuum where she mimics the mammy water to the extent that she has simply become the mask. It is that mask that she now hands over to Zilayefa.

Conclusion

Although mixed-race women are believed to be special people, the privilege accorded them stems from their white ancestry, an idea that unwittingly assumes the racial superiority of Caucasians. More important is the fact that this privileged view does not prevent mixed-race women from being maligned as Mammy water. As Agari's novel has shown, the earlier generations of the "Yellows" manage to escape some of these stereotypes, unlike the latter ones considered to be nothing more than trash (born-troways), especially because many of these women are raised by mothers whose European partners have absconded (74). This practice suggests that the stereotyping and stigmatization are not merely a matter of biracialism but also an issue of taboo regarding sex and class. The novel has been able to show that the issue of morality is a myth because participants in transactional sex are not pre-determined by race or ethnicity. In addition, the lack of equal access to wealth in big cities has forced some women and their biracial children into society's underclass, making some characters to associate being mixed-race with deprivation and social exclusion. *Yellow-Yellow* has demonstrated that Zilayefa's mother is a well-disciplined mother who has sacrificed her entire life for her only child. Emem's character has also helped to destabilize the myth of the Mammy water, she is not biracial in the same way that Zilayefa is because her mother is the mixed-race child. Regardless of their racial constitution, these women constantly confront social stigmatization as Mammy, often leading to traumatic pain (Ogunfolabi 42). The mammy water might have been a myth or stereotype. It has turned these women into social outliers who are more or less pariahs. Such social rejection forces Emem and Zilayefa to embrace aggressive material acquisition as passport to upward mobility. As such, they consciously mimic hyper-sexuality. Of course, even though Emem and Zilayefa are not evenly immersed in the practice, they both refuse to antagonize the discrimination but instead perform it. From the perspectives of the novel's bigots, they are simply beautiful trash; but they see themselves as mixed-race women whose society has hurt, and who self-consciously occupy Mammy water's domain.

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