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The rupture and recovery: Analyzing female identity formation in Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow through the lens of Herman's Trauma theory

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the themes of rupture and recovery in female identity formation in Kaine Agary's novel Yellow-Yellow, using Judith Herman's trauma theory as a guiding framework. The narrative centers on Zilayefa, a young biracial woman raised in the marginalized and ecologically devastated Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Born to a Nigerian mother and an absent Greek father, Zilayefa struggles with feelings of abandonment, alienation, and exploitation, which collectively shape her fractured sense of self. The novel reflects the emotional and psychological consequences of growing up in a patriarchal, postcolonial society marked by socio-economic instability and environmental destruction. Drawing from Herman's trauma theory, which outlines three stages of trauma recovery establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection this study descriptively outlines how Zilayefa's journey mirrors these stages. The research highlights how her identity is ruptured by her early experiences of neglect, racialized prejudice, and gender-based violence, and how moments of self-awareness and interaction with supportive female figures suggest the initial phases of healing and empowerment.

KEYWORDS: female identity, rupture, trauma recovery, postcolonial literature, psychological healing

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Introduction

The current study explores how female identity is represented and shaped in *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), a novel set in the socio-politically unstable Niger Delta of Nigeria. The protagonist, Laye (Zilayefa), is a young biracial woman whose coming-of-age story unfolds within a landscape marked by environmental degradation, economic hardship, and patriarchal norms. From her earliest years, Zilayefa endures emotional and psychological upheaval characterized by paternal abandonment, social exclusion due to her mixed heritage, and gender-based exploitation. These experiences fracture her sense of self and disrupt her path toward personal stability and belonging. As she navigates both rural and urban spaces, she encounters further challenges that test her emotional resilience and expose the deep-rooted structures of marginalization that shape female experience in postcolonial Nigerian society. To understand the nuanced representation of Zilayefa's identity formation, this study draws on Judith Herman's trauma theory (1992), which identifies trauma as a complex and layered disruption of the self, particularly following experiences of interpersonal violence, neglect, and betrayal. Herman's framework divided into three key stages: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection provides a useful lens through which to trace Zilayefa's personal journey from psychological rupture toward the possibility of healing and self-reclamation. The study examines how moments of loss, confusion, and self-doubt are not merely individual setbacks but rather reflections of broader socio-cultural pressures and historical legacies of colonialism, displacement, and gender inequality. Though this paper adopts a descriptive approach and refrains from deep critical analysis, it seeks to outline how Herman's trauma model can illuminate the structure and flow of Zilayefa's narrative. By mapping the events of the novel onto Herman's stages of trauma recovery, the study highlights how literature can serve as a powerful vehicle for articulating emotional pain, identity struggle, and the human capacity for survival. Zilayefa's story exemplifies how young women, particularly those at the intersection of gender, race, and class vulnerability, must navigate hostile environments in their search for identity, dignity, and self-determination. Through its descriptive reading, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how trauma theory can inform our interpretation of African female narratives and underscores the significance of *Yellow-Yellow* as a literary work that reflects both rupture and the enduring hope of recovery. Understanding the formation of female identity in trauma contexts is crucial, especially within postcolonial African societies. Female characters like Zilayefa serve as representations of the wider experiences of disenfranchised women affected by personal and political instability. (Craps, 2013) Trauma theory, especially Herman's (1992), allows for an understanding of how characters survive and gradually reconstruct their identities amid structural and emotional violence. (Caruth, 1996), (Balaev, 2012). Moreover, the reconstruction of female identity in trauma narratives often involves navigating complex intersections of memory, silence, and resistance. In postcolonial African literature, these elements become tools through which female protagonists challenge imposed identities and reclaim agency. Authors utilize fragmented storytelling, inner monologues, and symbolic spaces to illustrate the psychological and cultural dislocation experienced by women like Zilayefa. This not only highlights the enduring impact of colonial and patriarchal systems but also showcases the resilience and adaptive strategies women employ to assert their individuality and autonomy in the face of recurring trauma. The intersection of trauma theory and postcolonial African literature has generated a robust body of scholarship that seeks to understand how narratives of pain, loss, and survival are constructed in contexts of socio-political instability. Female identity, in particular, has emerged as a central concern in these studies, as women often bear the compounded burdens of colonial legacies, gender-based violence, and structural inequalities. Scholars such as Kaplan (2005) and Caruth (1996) argue that trauma is not merely a psychological phenomenon, but a cultural and political condition embedded in historical context. (Caruth, 1996, pp. 4-5) In African literature, trauma frequently manifests through fragmented narratives, silences, and a search for voice and agency especially among female characters.

Several scholars have examined how postcolonial African texts navigate identity crises among biracial or socially marginalized protagonists. Okuyade's edited volume "Degraded Environment and Destabilized Women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*", Awhefeada (2013) compellingly argues that environmental degradation in the Niger Delta operates as a metaphor for the exploitation of women's bodies. (p. 95)

Building on the insights of Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) and Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), who argue that African women writers disrupt patriarchal and colonial discourses by foregrounding female subjectivity and agency, Judith Herman's trauma theory provides a compelling psychological framework to deepen this analysis. Herman

emphasizes that recovery from trauma is not simply about surviving harm but about reclaiming one's narrative, autonomy, and identity. (Herman,1992,p.56) In this context, characters like Zilayefa in *Yellow-Yellow* are not merely portrayed as passive victims of social and emotional violence but as individuals navigating the complex stages of trauma recovery from disempowerment to gradual reintegration and reconnection.

Furthermore, Eze (2011) and Alexander (2004) discuss the concept of cultural trauma and its influence on collective and individual identity. They argue that trauma is a site of both rupture and reconstruction, where the self is destabilized but also potentially transformed. In *Yellow-Yellow*, the transformation of Zilayefa from emotional dependence to self-reflective agency is illustrative of the kind of trauma processing that Dominick LaCapra refers to as "working through trauma", (LaCapra,2001,p.42) LaCapra defines this process as a gradual distancing from past suffering, enabling the individual to confront painful memories, resist compulsive repetition, and begin imagining alternative futures.

Rather than being defined solely by her pain or abandonment, Zilayefa's journey reflects an ongoing struggle for self-definition within a society that commodifies and misreads her racialized and gendered identity. Her eventual recognition of the limitations of romantic and societal validation, and her steps toward personal boundaries and self-awareness, echo Herman's assertion that "the final task of recovery is to reconnect with ordinary life" and to rebuild relationships based on "mutuality and autonomy". (Herman,1992, p.196) In this light, her character can be read as an agent of psychic and symbolic resistance, asserting identity not through confrontation but through transformation and internal clarity.

Zilayefa's *yellow* complexion operates as a powerful symbol in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, encapsulating the intersection of race, gender, and postcolonial identity. Within Nigerian society, light skin often referred to colloquially as "*yellow*" carries complex meanings shaped by colonial legacies and persistent colorism. From the outset, Zilayefa is marked by her difference: her skin is both a reminder of her absent Greek father and a source of curiosity, judgment, and objectification. As she recalls, "People always stared at me... I looked like I did not belong" (Agary,2006, p.16). Her complexion, far from being merely aesthetic, becomes a site of psychological burden and sociocultural projection. It isolates her in her village and renders her hyper-visible in the city, where her desirability is tied to an exoticized perception of her body.

This aspect of Zilayefa's experience aligns with Judith Herman's theory of trauma, which argues that a survivor's sense of self is often fragmented and shaped by how others perceive and misuse them. (Herman,1992, p.52) Her identity is not self-defined but constructed through the gaze of a society that both reveres and rejects her. Her yellow skin becomes a metaphor for her in betweenness; she is neither fully African nor fully foreign, neither innocent nor empowered. This symbolic burden becomes central to her emotional and psychological development and her eventual path toward self-reclamation. As she matures, Zilayefa begins to resist these external definitions, suggesting a movement toward Herman's third phase of trauma recovery: reconnection, where the survivor seeks to redefine their identity beyond the terms of victimhood. (Herman ,1992, p.196)

The title *Yellow-Yellow* itself serves as a central symbol that encapsulates the protagonist Zilayefa's struggle with identity, belonging, and postcolonial alienation. In Nigerian society, the term 'yellow-yellow' is a colloquial expression used to describe individuals of mixed race or light skin, often with connotations of exoticism, beauty, and moral ambiguity. This racialized label becomes both a marker of social distinction and a burden of expectation. Zilayefa's light skin renders her visible and desirable in urban spaces; yet, that visibility comes at the cost of being reduced to a stereotype. As one man tells her, "You don't look like you're from here... you're special," a comment that, rather than affirming her humanity, objectifies her difference. (Agary,2006, p.43)

The symbolism of yellow thus operates on multiple registers: it signifies colonial legacy, gendered vulnerability, and displacement. Zilayefa's skin color becomes a site of psychological tension as a reminder of her absent father, the commodification of her body, and the sociocultural gap she inhabits between rural and urban Nigeria. This is consistent with Judith Herman's argument that trauma "disrupts the sense of self," particularly when survivors internalize external perceptions that fragment their identity. (Herman,1992, p.52) Zilayefa's 'yellow' identity, while seemingly a privilege, becomes a source of isolation and alienation. It distances her from her community and frames her worth through the eyes of men and a society shaped by colonial ideals of beauty and femininity.

However, the symbol of yellow changes from confusion and objectification to one of critical awareness.

Zilayefa begins to question the structures that define her and attempts to move beyond imposed categories. This transformation aligns with Herman's third stage of trauma recovery, reconnection, in which the survivor seeks to reclaim authorship over their own narrative and redefine the self beyond the terms of the trauma. (Herman, 1992, p.196) In this light, the title *Yellow-Yellow* functions not only as a symbol of racial and gender identity but also as a metaphor for the protagonist's journey from fragmentation to partial wholeness.

Discussion

Judith Herman's trauma theory (1992), which underpins this study, provides a psychological framework through which personal and collective traumas can be understood. Her model identifies three stages of trauma recovery: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection which serve as a useful tool for analyzing character development in trauma narratives. Herman emphasizes that recovery is nonlinear and deeply shaped by the social environment, a notion echoed by feminist theorists like Nnaemeka (1997), who explore how African women writers represent trauma as a multi-layered experience entangled with motherhood, memory, silence, and resistance. Thus, the literature reveals a confluence of psychological, environmental, and socio-political dimensions in the representation of trauma and female identity in African fiction. By situating *Yellow-Yellow* within this broader scholarly discourse, this study not only builds on previous critical analyses but also applies Judith Herman's trauma model as a structured framework for tracing the protagonist's journey from rupture to recovery. Trauma especially for female characters is not isolated; it unfolds within socio-political contexts deeply shaped by gender norms. As E. Ann Kaplan argues in *Trauma Culture* (2005), trauma is often mediated and intensified by cultural and institutional forces, making women particularly vulnerable due to entrenched gender expectations. (Kaplan, 2005, p.38)

Herman's theory (1992) suggests that trauma recovery occurs in three stages: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. These stages provide a narrative pattern through which the trauma survivor reclaims agency and coherence. Applied to Zilayefa's experience, these stages help identify markers of psychological and emotional healing, demonstrating how she gradually moves

Zilayefa's journey is thus emblematic of the struggle many women face in negotiating their identities amid deeply embedded systems of oppression. The phases of trauma recovery not only offer insight into her psychological evolution but also reflect a broader commentary on the resilience of women who endure and resist multiple layers of trauma. Her efforts to establish a sense of safety, confront painful memories, and reconnect with both herself and her community illustrate a powerful narrative of healing that challenges the silence often imposed on female trauma survivors. Through this lens, trauma theory becomes a vital tool in unpacking how personal recovery can mirror collective resistance, particularly in literature that seeks to amplify marginalized voices. The novel *Yellow-Yellow* illustrates a young woman's journey through trauma, self-discovery, and recovery in a context of cultural dislocation and emotional abandonment. Judith Herman's seminal trauma theory, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), provides a fitting framework to analyze the protagonist Zilayefa's psychological evolution. According to Herman, trauma recovery unfolds in three stages: establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma narrative, and restoring connection with others and oneself. Zilayefa's trajectory across the novel aligns with these phases, revealing a nuanced portrayal of female trauma and identity reconstruction. (Herman, 1992, pp.33-38)

Zilayefa, a seventeen-year-old secondary school graduate and the only child of Binaebi, an Ijaw woman, grows up navigating the emotional absence of her father and the social weight of her mixed heritage. Her mother's earlier journey to Port Harcourt in pursuit of economic stability ends in betrayal, as she returns home pregnant by Admiral, a fellow Ijaw man who abandons her. Inheriting a light complexion that earns her the nickname "Yellow-Yellow", Zilayefa becomes curious about her paternal identity and increasingly dissatisfied with the limitations of her rural life. When an oil spill destroys her mother's farmland and plunges them into economic struggle, Zilayefa chooses to leave for Port Harcourt not as an act of escape alone, but as a bold step toward self-discovery and transformation. (Agray, 2006, pp.10-15) Though her journey is marked by emotional vulnerability and romantic missteps, these experiences become essential to her psychological growth. Her story, then, is not one of tragic downfall but of resilient emergence, shaped by her mother's dignity and her own evolving sense of purpose. (Orie, 2012, p.75) Zilayefa's initial departure from her village to Port Harcourt is marked by emotional vulnerability and fear. She is thrust into a chaotic urban life without guidance or

preparation. The moment she arrives; she reflects: “I knew my life had changed. I was seventeen years old, and even though I had no idea what kind of life lay ahead of me, the feeling that things were not going to be the same again made my ears red and my nose tingle as tears glazed my eyes”. (Agary,2006, p.45) This quote captures her emotional upheaval and sense of dislocation, a critical entry point into trauma. In Port Harcourt, she struggles to adapt to even basic urban routines, stating, “On my first morning, something as simple as operating the shower was a challenge”. (Agary, 2006, p.69) These moments reveal a lack of security and control, aligning with Herman’s assertion that establishing safety is foundational for trauma recovery.

The second stage of recovery in Herman’s theory involves revisiting the traumatic experience and processing grief. Zilayefa experiences a traumatic miscarriage, which becomes a defining emotional rupture. She describes the agony in raw detail: “I curled up in the fetal position... the blood that gushed from between my legs drenched my clothes, and I began to shiver from the cold and the pain”. (Agary,2006, p.178) The physical trauma is paralleled by emotional devastation as she recognizes the consequences of her choices: “I cried but could not feel sorry for myself because I had made the choices that got me into trouble”. (Agary,2006, p.178) Her grief is compounded by the emotional neglect she experiences from Admiral, the man she trusted: “I felt as if I had been gutted... I packed up my things... and dashed out of his house”. (Agary,2006, p.161) These scenes capture Herman’s notion of confronting and mourning the trauma to integrate it into the self.

The final stage of Herman’s model is rebuilding relationships and a renewed sense of self. For Zilayefa, literature becomes a healing refuge. She notes, “I read because the books took me to other worlds and made me forget my own reality”. (Agary,2006, p.31) Reading becomes both a coping mechanism and a tool for empowerment. Additionally, her connection with Lolo, a supportive female figure, begins to fill the emotional void left by her absent parents.

Zilayefa, the biracial daughter of a Nigerian woman and a Greek sailor, is raised in a rural Niger Delta community shaped by poverty, environmental degradation, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms. Her biracial identity marks her as an outsider, both within her immediate community and within the broader Nigerian society. The absence of her father who represents not only a personal loss but also a symbol of colonial abandonment creates a deep emotional void, one that fosters feelings of rejection, internalized shame, and identity confusion. Zilayefa’s early life is thus characterized by an ongoing struggle to reconcile her mixed heritage with her longing for acceptance and belonging, themes that are central to the psychological formation of female identity in trauma contexts.

This internal struggle is compounded by her environment. The novel unfolds in a region devastated by the consequences of oil exploitation, where multinational corporations, in collusion with corrupt state actors, plunder natural resources while leaving local communities impoverished and disempowered. This environmental and socio-economic exploitation becomes a potent metaphor for the exploitation of female bodies within patriarchal systems, where women are similarly used, silenced, and discarded (Awhefeada ,2013, p.95). Although trauma is often associated with suffering and psychological fragmentation, in the context of *Yellow-Yellow* and much African literature, it also serves as a catalyst for transformation and self-growth. The traumatic experiences endured by Zilayefa do not strip her of identity; rather, they compel her to reconstruct it in more conscious and empowered ways. According to Judith Herman’s trauma theory, recovery involves not only overcoming pain but reclaiming personal narrative and agency, which Zilayefa achieves as she moves beyond the destructive effects of her emotional and social traumas (Herman, 1992, pp. 36–40). Trauma acts as a disruptive force against socially imposed and patriarchal identities, enabling women to redefine themselves beyond traditional constraints . (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 82) In Zilayefa’s case, trauma from paternal absence, emotional neglect, and economic exploitation fosters a growing self-awareness and a path toward an independent identity rooted in resilience and resistance.

Furthermore, trauma in postcolonial African contexts often embodies the tensions between tradition and modernity, providing a critical space to expose social and political struggles women face, enriching understandings of identity reconstruction through confronting pain and injustice. (Kaplan, 2005, pp. 38- 40) Thus, trauma is not merely a wound but an opportunity for empowerment and transformation, turning suffering into a driving force for change.

Moreover, Zilayefa’s experience cannot be divorced from the socio-political conditions that shape and perpetuate her trauma. Kaplan (2005) emphasizes that trauma is not merely a psychological event but one that

is deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts particularly for women whose identities are formed under the weight of colonial legacies, economic inequalities, and gender hierarchies. (p.38) Zilayefa's narrative thus functions on multiple levels: as a personal story of survival and as a broader critique of the societal structures that marginalize and endanger women. Her resilience is not only a testament to individual strength but also an act of defiance against systems of control that seek to define and confine her. In this light, Zilayefa embodies the possibility of transformation through trauma. She is not simply a victim, but a complex, evolving subject whose identity is shaped by both suffering and strength. Her story invites readers to consider how female identity is constructed and reconstructed through the interplay of personal pain and collective history, offering a nuanced perspective on trauma, resistance, and the enduring search for belonging in a fractured world.

Zilayefa's biracial identity becomes a source of social alienation. Though the name *Yellow-Yellow* appears on the surface to describe her light skin, it functions as a label of shame and exclusion as she reflects, *Yellow-Yellow*. That is what most people in my village called me because of my complexion, the product of a Greek father and an Ijaw mother". (Agary,2006, p.7) Beneath the name lies a long history of abandonment, racial othering, and the inherited trauma of being born from a brief encounter between her mother and a foreigner who never looked back.

Her mixed heritage, far from being a bridge between two worlds, becomes a burden that alienates her from both the rural villagers, who see her as an outsider, and the urban elites, who view her with disdain or exploit her exoticism. In both spaces, she is caught in a liminal position visible yet invisible, present yet excluded. The village women often whisper behind her back, questioning her morality and dismissing her aspirations. In the city, her light skin attracts attention, but it is an attention grounded in superficial desire rather than genuine acceptance. One man remarks, "You don't look like you're from here... you're special," reducing her identity to a mere visual spectacle rather than engaging with her as a person with depth, history, and complexity. (Agary,2006, p.43)

Zilayefa's quest for belonging, then, is not only geographical or social is deeply emotional and psychological, marked by silence, confusion, and a yearning for clarity. This emotional journey reflects what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) identifies as the internal struggle of postcolonial African women who must navigate the intersecting pressures of tradition, modernity, gender, and race. (p.36) Zilayefa's inner voice often reflects this turmoil. At one point, she confesses, "I didn't know who I was or where I belonged. My mother's world was too small for me, but the city's world didn't want me either". (Agary,2006, p.56) This statement captures the existential void at the heart of her identity a space where names, places, and relationships fail to offer the stability she craves.

The emotional fragmentation she experiences is exacerbated by the absence of her Greek father, whose abandonment leaves an unresolved gap in her understanding of herself. His absence becomes both a literal and symbolic void, as she struggles to piece together who she is without knowing fully where she comes from. Her attempts to ask her mother about him are met with silence or evasion, leaving her with unanswered questions and a growing sense of shame. "Mama never spoke his name," she says, "like saying it would make him real and bring back all the pain". (Agary,2006, p.9) This silence becomes a form of emotional inheritance, passed down through generations of women who have learned to bury their trauma rather than confront it. As Zilayefa navigates life in the city, she is drawn into exploitative relationships that mirror the power imbalances of her earlier life. Men approach her not with respect, but with expectations shaped by her appearance and presumed background. These interactions, though damaging, are also revelatory; they expose the societal mechanisms that objectify and commodify women, particularly those who exist at the margins. Yet, despite these hardships, Zilayefa begins to carve a path toward self-awareness. Her reflections become more assertive, more questioning. "Maybe I wasn't the problem," she muses. "Maybe it was the world that didn't know how to see me". (Agary,2006, p.182) This shift in perspective marks the beginning of her reclamation of identity not defined by how others label her, but by how she begins to understand herself. In this way, the term "yellow-yellow," initially a source of humiliation and marginalization, becomes a site of critical inquiry and potential empowerment.

Zilayefa's journey illustrates the complex ways in which identity is constructed and contested in postcolonial African settings. The trauma of being different of being labeled, silenced, and misread is not overcome easily, but it can become a catalyst for personal growth and resistance. Through Zilayefa's evolving

consciousness, the novel critiques not only racial and gender discrimination but also the societal structures that perpetuate silence and shame. By giving voice to her pain, the narrative affirms the power of storytelling as a means of reclaiming agency and forging identity amidst fragmentation. (Agary, 2006, pp. 180-183) Abandoned by her father and emotional distance from her mother form the psychological rupture at the core of Zilayefa's identity a wound that shapes her interactions with the world and leaves her searching for validation in places where she finds only harm. Her father's absence is not merely a familial loss, but a foundational trauma that leaves her with an unresolved longing to understand who she is and where she belongs. "I used to imagine him coming back," Zilayefa reflects, "telling me I looked like him, that he had always loved me. But he never came, and Mama never said why". (Agary, 2006, p. 13) This absence becomes a ghost in her psyche, haunting her with questions she cannot answer and shaping her sense of worth through a lens of abandonment and invisibility.

Her mother, though physically present, is emotionally distant, preoccupied with survival and shaped by her own history of disappointment and silence. She rarely provides the emotional support or affirmations that Zilayefa craves. Conversations between them are often terse, loaded with unspoken grief and resentment. "Mama's eyes told stories she never said out loud," Zilayefa recalls. "She spoke with silence, and I was left to guess what she felt, what she feared, what she wanted for me". (Agary, 2006, p. 45) This maternal silence becomes a second kind of abandonment, compounding Zilayefa's emotional isolation and creating a void where affection, guidance, and trust should have been. As Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) argues, the absence or emotional unavailability of parental figures in postcolonial African literature often symbolizes the broader fragmentation of identity and heritage, particularly for women grappling with issues of legitimacy, acceptance, and autonomy. These early traumas render Zilayefa particularly vulnerable to the advances of older, more powerful men in Port Harcourt a city that promises opportunity but delivers exploitation. Her move to the city, fueled by dreams of freedom and reinvention, quickly becomes a disillusioning journey. Lacking strong female role models or safe emotional spaces, she becomes easy prey to men who see her not as a person, but as an object to be used. Her relationship with an older man, who initially showers her with attention and gifts, exemplifies this pattern of manipulation and abandonment. "He made me feel seen," she admits, "like I mattered. But once he got what he wanted, I became invisible again". (Agary, 2006 p. 102) This cycle of attention and dismissal echoes her earlier experiences with her father and mother, revealing how unresolved childhood trauma replays itself in adult relationships.

These experiences are not isolated personal struggles but rather manifestations of broader structural inequalities related to gender, power, and control. As Molar Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) explains, African women are often trapped in "a triple heritage of oppression" from colonial structures, indigenous patriarchy, and global capitalism that restrict their agency and reduce their bodies to contested spaces of identity and survival (Agary, 2006, p. 28).

Zilayefa's story illustrates this dynamic poignantly. She is continuously searching for love, protection, and a sense of home, but she finds only conditional affection given in exchange for obedience, silence, or sexual submission. The absence of empowering female voices in her life leaves her without a framework for resistance or healing. Women around her either reinforce traditional norms or remain complicit in systems of silence, unable or unwilling to speak out. Yet, even in this bleak terrain, moments of self-awareness begin to emerge. After one particularly painful betrayal, Zilayefa reflects, "I was tired of being someone else's mistake. I wanted to be my own story, even if it was broken". (Agary, 2006, page 120) This statement marks a turning point a subtle but profound shift from passivity to agency. While she may not yet possess the tools to fully escape or transform her situation, her inner voice begins to challenge the narratives that have defined her. She starts to recognize the patterns of exploitation and begins to imagine a different life, one where she might define herself on her own terms.

The psychological rupture caused by parental abandonment and emotional neglect is thus not only a source of vulnerability but also a site of potential transformation. Zilayefa's journey through pain, silence, and manipulation reflects the layered complexities of female identity formation in postcolonial contexts. Her experiences show how trauma can distort relationships and self-perception, but also how, through reflection and narrative, individuals can begin to reclaim agency. By voicing her pain and questioning the structures that have shaped her, Zilayefa challenges the cycles of abandonment and silence that have defined her life. Her story becomes a powerful exploration of the emotional cost of neglect and the quiet strength required to survive

it·(Kaplan,2005) In this way, Yellow-Yellow not only portrays the personal struggles of one young woman but also offers a broader critique of the gendered dimensions of trauma and exploitation· Zilayefa's vulnerability is deeply contextualized within a society that fails to protect or uplift women, especially those who fall outside normative definitions of race, class, and legitimacy·(Ogundipe-Leslie,1997) Her story is a call to recognize the emotional landscapes of abandonment, the consequences of silence, and the urgent need for supportive, empowering female networks in the face of persistent patriarchal control·

The polluted and devastated landscape of the Niger Delta serves not only as the physical setting of Yellow-Yellow, but also as a profound metaphor for Zilayefa's inner world a world marked by confusion, emotional toxicity, and a longing for renewal· he polluted and devastated landscape of the Niger Delta is not merely a backdrop in Yellow-Yellow, but a powerful metaphor for Zilayefa's inner disorientation. The oil spills that blacken the rivers and suffocate marine life mirror her emotional fragmentation and the sense of abandonment that shapes her adolescence. As she describes: "It was black, the water. Thick and dark like it had absorbed all the sins of the people who lived by it". (Agary,2006, p.83) This striking image of a river turned toxic resonates with the psychological contamination Zilayefa feels betrayed by her absent father, exploited by older men, and caught in a society that offers her few safe choices. The natural landscape, once a site of life and sustenance, is rendered lifeless and dangerous just as Zilayefa's body and identity are manipulated in a world shaped by gendered power imbalances. The corruption of the land becomes a mirror to the corruption of human relationships, both marked by exploitation, erasure, and systemic disregard.

Though Zilayefa remains emotionally fragile throughout much of the novel, a subtle, yet powerful shift begins to emerge in her consciousness; a shift from passivity to questioning, from emotional dependence to psychological awareness. After enduring a series of exploitative encounters with older men who view her as a sexual object rather than a full human being, she begins to critically evaluate the intentions behind their actions. This transition marks the initial phase of reclaiming agency, aligning with Judith Herman's (1992) framework of trauma recovery, where the first step is establishing safety and reasserting control over one's internal world. Zilayefa's emotional awakening becomes evident when she reflects: "Each time I thought it was love· Each time I was wrong· They wanted something, and when they got it, I was left with silence"· (Agary,2006,p-150) This realization doesn't immediately lead to empowerment, but it signals the beginning of psychological distancing from the manipulation that has defined much of her adolescent and early adult experience· Her increasing skepticism toward the men in her life is a necessary survival mechanism, and it reflects a growing understanding of her own vulnerability within a patriarchal structure that thrives on silence and compliance· This evolution is particularly evident when she starts observing the patterns in her relationships, especially the repetition of abandonment and disappointment· In one poignant moment, Zilayefa admits "I started noticing the lies before they were told· The glint in the eyes, the half-smile that didn't reach the heart· I knew then, I wasn't special to them· Just convenient"· (Agary,2006,p-195) This insight represents a crucial internal shift while she may still feel emotionally entangled, she is no longer blind to the transactional nature of these relationships· Her emotional responses are no longer governed purely by longing and self-blame, but by a budding critical consciousness that allows her to begin separating herself from the narratives imposed on her by others·

This psychological distancing is further emphasized through her growing self-awareness and desire to reclaim her sense of self· Although she is still navigating confusion and pain, she begins to assert her right to define her own story, rather than letting others dictate her worth· After one particularly disillusioning encounter, Zilayefa states: "I didn't want to be rescued anymore· I wanted to rescue myself even if I didn't know how yet"· (Agary,2006,p-215) This quote signals a powerful shift in perspective· It encapsulates the complex interplay between fragility and strength that defines her character at this stage· While she is not yet fully autonomous or healed, the desire for self-rescue indicates a critical departure from the dependency that previously defined her emotional world· This aspiration reflects Herman's (1992) second stage of recovery: remembrance and mourning an acknowledgment of past harm and a grieving process that prepares the survivor for transformation· Lastly, Zilayefa's growing emotional clarity also allows her to begin imagining a future beyond victimhood· She starts to resist the internalized shame that once silenced her, recognizing that her pain is not a reflection of her worth but of the society that has failed her· Her reflections become more philosophical, more attuned to the wider patterns of exploitation and inequality around her· She thus muses: "Maybe it wasn't me that was broken· Maybe it was this place, this world, that didn't know how to love without hurting". (Agary,2006, p.221)

This quote is not just an expression of despair but of awakening a realization that personal trauma is deeply entangled with structural injustices. By naming the external conditions that have contributed to her suffering, Zilayefa begins to loosen their hold on her psyche. Her evolving consciousness, though still incomplete, lays the groundwork for future healing and autonomy, embodying the early stages of what Herman (1992) calls reconnection; the capacity to build a new self and new relationships grounded in truth and agency.

Though incomplete and fraught with uncertainty, Zilayefa's journey toward autonomy signals the slow and painful emergence of what Judith Herman (1992) describes as the third phase of trauma recovery as reconnection. (p.196) This phase involves the survivor's gradual reintegration into life with a renewed sense of self, autonomy, and purpose. For Zilayefa, reconnection is not marked by grand triumphs or clear closure, but by subtle moments of resistance and the tentative shaping of a new identity. These moments occur when she begins to emotionally detach from the harmful relationships that have defined her sense of worth; and when she considers, for the first time, the possibility of living for herself rather than through the approval or validation of others. She confesses so: "I began to realize that I had to live my life for myself not for my mother, not for my father, not for the memory of the man who left us, and certainly not for Admiral". (Agary, 2006, p.120)

This moment of insight, quiet revolutionary, encapsulates the early formation of self-authorship a reclaiming of her body, her choices, and her narrative. Zilayefa's movement away from toxic relationships, particularly with the older men in Port Harcourt, who used her for their own gratification, represents an important psychological rupture from the cycles of dependency and emotional neglect that have shaped her life. She no longer accepts exploitation as love, or silence as survival. In a critical turning point, she observes: "I had let myself believe that he loved me. But love should not feel like something you have to endure". (Agary, 2006, p.112).

This act of leaving is not presented as a final escape or an ultimate solution; rather, it is a gesture of emotional self-preservation. It shows that while Zilayefa may not yet know who she is or where she is going, she has begun to understand what she no longer wants is a crucial step in trauma recovery. Her actions align with LaCapra's (2001) argument that working through trauma involves resisting the repetition of destructive behaviors and forging alternative futures, even when the path ahead remains undefined. (p.144) Contemplating independence, Zilayefa imagines a life unshackled from shame and dictated by her own decisions, even if those decisions are marked by fear or uncertainty. Her evolving inner dialogue becomes more assertive and self-reflective, hinting at the emotional labor required moving toward wholeness. She thus narrates "I did not want to be anybody's kept woman. I wanted to be free to make my own decisions, to make mistakes and learn from them, to live with the consequences of my choices". (Agary, 2006, p.120)

The novel ends with Zilayefa still grappling with loss, ambiguity, and the painful echoes of her past. Yet, this lack of finality is its own kind of truth. Trauma, as Herman (1992) and other theorists assert, does not follow a neat trajectory. Its wounds may be reopened, its memories may linger, and its consequences may stretch into every corner of a survivor's life. Zilayefa's partial healing towards her decision to leave, to dream, and to reflect illustrates that reconnection is less about achieving wholeness than about reclaiming enough of the self to continue. As she says near the novel's end: "I was still afraid, but I was also awake. And maybe that was enough for now". (Agary, 2006, p.176) In that final line, lies a quiet strength: a recognition that survival itself is a form of resistance, and that healing begins not with perfection, but with the courage to awaken.

In *Yellow-Yellow*, Zilayefa's transformation from emotional dependence to self-reflective agency exemplifies the process that Dominick LaCapra (2001) describes as "working through trauma." This concept involves a conscious effort to confront and process past suffering in a way that resists compulsive repetition and opens the possibility for alternative futures. According to LaCapra, this process enables the survivor to establish a critical distance from traumatic memories while gradually integrating them into a new narrative of selfhood (p. 42) She moves beyond the emotional paralysis caused by her abandonment and exploitation, engages in introspection, and begins to redefine her identity on her own terms within a society that had previously silenced her.

Conclusion

Using trauma theory, particularly Judith Herman's three-stage model of recovery safety, remembrance, mourning, and reconnection, this study has examined how the protagonist of Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, Zilayefa,

navigates psychological rupture, marginalization, and gender-based exploitation in a socio-politically unstable environment. The novel portrays trauma not as an isolated event, but as a persistent condition shaped by abandonment, racial othering, and the structural violence of patriarchy and neocolonialism. Through a blend of narrative introspection and social critique, *Yellow-Yellow* illustrates how female subjectivity is fractured; yet, potentially reformulated through processes of awareness, dialogue, and emotional resistance. Although Zilayefa's healing remains incomplete, her growing self-awareness and tentative steps toward autonomy emphasize the non-linear, complex nature of trauma recovery. Ultimately, the novel asserts that identity reconstruction in the aftermath of trauma is not about reaching finality, but about regaining agency, voice, and the capacity to imagine a different future.

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