

The Experience of Nigerian Ladies in the International Sex-Trafficking and Prostitution: a Reading of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked

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Abstract: Through textual analysis, the paper examines Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's artistic response in *Trafficked*, to the experience of Nigerian ladies in the international sex-trade and prostitution. Through characterization, setting and other literary devices, the writer dramatizes the nature, form and effect of the sex-trade on Nigeria. The rehabilitation and reintegration of victims of the trade into society through legislation, advocacy and entrepreneurship education are some strategies suggested by the writer to mitigate the negative effects of the trade on individual victims and on the larger Nigerian society. Such effects, as indentified by the writer include: societal collapse, the separation of loved ones, emotional dislocation, depression, oppression and exploitation among others. It is hoped that this present enquiry would help to better explicit the text, and make additional contributions towards the liberation of women from patriarchal oppression and exploitation.

I. Introduction

The struggle to better the conditions of the female gender, across the globe, has continued to receive significant critical attention over the decades. As part of the global concern, this struggle, in 1995, led to the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing, China with a bold agenda to defend the cause of women especially in the political sphere.

In Nigeria, Women in Nigeria (WIN) a Non-governmental Organization (NGO) has continued to champion the struggle for the total liberation of women at both the political, socio-economic and cultural spheres. The success of the struggle is, however, a different matter which does not form the discussion of this paper. It is, however, interesting to note that the bold efforts of WIN have continued to be complemented by several other women-focused Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Women's Rights, Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) and Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) among others. The determinism to improve the fortunes of women especially their socio-economic wellbeing and free them from abuse, exploitation, oppression, degradation and patriarchy has continued to represent the broader objectives of all the women-focused organizations and associations. WOTCLEF, for instance, specifically aims at fighting against the trafficking of women and children for the sex-trade, forced labour and other associative crimes against the female folk.

In spite of the diverse efforts and apologetics for the cause of women, the Nigerian woman, even in the era of globalization, has continued to be weighed down by variegated acts of oppression, deprivation, exploitation and degradation. The patriarchal structure of the Nigerian society unfortunately aids and abets these maladies and many others against the women folk. Currently, the trafficking of women for the international sex-trade (sex-trafficking) still looms large as one hydra headed problem advocates of women liberation, be they human rights activists, politicians and creative writers have to contend with. Sex trafficking or slavery is the exploitation of women and children, within national and across international borders, for the purpose of forced sex work. It is characterized by the exploitation of human beings in exchange for goods or money. (<http://www.soroptimist.org/trafficking/faq.htm>)

In Nigeria, and elsewhere in the world, sex-trafficking, besides other social vices promotes prostitution, debases and dehumanizes womanhood. Mostly involved in the heinous trade are ladies who, with the support of adult members of the society, find themselves in locations other than theirs. Such adult members usually serve as agents and syndicates of a sex-trade gang. The agents and syndicates pose as benefactors of their victims with deceptive promises of getting decent jobs for their unsuspecting victims. However, rather than deliver on their promises, the victims end up as prostitutes in the international sex market. In the custody of their employers, the victims are forced to sell sex at a cost negotiated by the employers.

While Europe, the Middle East and Asia represent notorious destinations of most trafficked Nigerian ladies, the victims, besides sexual exploitation and slavery, face other travails and tribulations not limited to

physical torture, rape and their vulnerability to the contraction of the deadly HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Other condemnable negative effects of the sophisticated, heinous and barbarous modern slavery are immense. At the societal level, both victims and traffickers often graduate as allies of other social crimes such as international terrorism, drug abuse, arms and drug trafficking. Above all, “all forms of sexual exploitation are incompatible with human dignity, and therefore violate fundamental human rights, regardless of the age, gender, race, ethnicity or class of the victim” (Awake, 2003: 4).

This paper, through textual analysis, examines Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s artistic response to the trafficking of Nigerian ladies into the international sex market as explored in one of her novels – *Trafficked* (2008). Through setting, characterization and other literary devices, the writer dramatizes the nature, form and effects of the sex trade on the individual and society. What ought to be done to either halt the illegal trade or mitigate its dysfunctional effects are of equal concern to the writer. While the specific objective of this present enquiry is to help explicate the text, the broader objective is to contribute to the fight against child trafficking and the international sex trade.

II. The Nature and Effect of the International Sex Trafficking and Prostitution as Dramatized in the Novel.

Adimora Ezeigbo’s detailed characterization in *Trafficked* complements thematic exploration and the realization of narrative intention. Two broad character types exist. On one side, we have the oppressed and the exploited who are victims of the sex trade. On the other side are exploiters and oppressors who are collaborators and perpetrators of the international sex-trafficking and prostitution. The twenty four exploited young Nigerian ladies have Nneoma, Alice and Efe as prominent representative characters. Madam Dollar and Baron represent the trafficker - exploiters and oppressors. Indirect victims of the international sex-trafficking and prostitution include Ofomata, Nneoma’s betrothed husband, Adaeze and Ogukwe. The last two being parents of Nneoma. The experiences of the latter represent some negative effects of the international sex trade on the larger Nigerian society.

Madam Dollar is presented as an avaricious, sadistic, crafty and morally bankrupt woman who specializes in luring young Nigerian ladies into the international sex trade. Nneoma observes of her thus: “Madam Dollar – nothing comes between her and money. She keeps the girls prisoner in her house” (128).

Baron, also called Fyneface, resides both in London and Nigeria. As a pimp and an agent of Madam Dollar in the criminal gang of the sex trade, he specializes in arranging Nigerian ladies for export. He regularly buys and sells ladies as if they were merchandise. Nneoma describes him as “a sadist” and heartless exploiter (132). In a dialogue with Efe, she observes of both Madam Dollar and Baron thus: “They – Madam Dollar and Baron – never gave me money. They always claim I would get no money of my own until I had paid my debt. Even when the customers gave me money, they took it from me” (133). The debt bondage alluded to ought to be seen as a deliberate ploy by Madam Dollar to perpetually keep Efe and other ladies as victims in order to fully maximize her profit. Meanwhile, the narrator describes Baron as “a special breed ... a cheat and a heartless exploiter like many Africans – a thoroughbred Englishman and a typical son-of-the-soil Nigerian” (136).

Through character introspection, Nneoma laments over her travails and tribulations and indeed those of other victims in the hands of Baron thus:

Baron sends other girls to brothels and keeps me in his flat. Instead of putting me on the street, he brings men to the flat. Baron is a sadist. He rapes and beats me. I refuse when customers demand oral or anal sex and insist that they use condoms and I’m sometimes assaulted for this. Baron locks me up in the flat, and does not allow me to go out except when he takes me with him (132).

The preference of the “customers” for “oral or anal sex” reveals their bestiality and the vulnerability of the ladies to the contraction of deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS. From the dialogue, the writer explores the effects of the sex trade on Nigerian victims. Such effects include: physical assault and torture. Others are deprivation, the violation of their fundamental human rights, loss of sleep and unwanted pregnancy.

Madam Gold is portrayed as a sadistic exploiter. As a pimp resident in Italy, she forces Efe and other ladies “to sell their bodies to all comers” (100). Meanwhile, in a dialogue with Nneoma, Efe laments over her bitter ordeal, in the hands of her victim, as an international prostitute in Italy:

Madam Gold sold me to a pimp – a white man – after four years of slaving for her. I worked for my “new owner” for two years before I escaped. Then I fled to Verona and teamed up with a prostitute I met there and worked independently for about another year, because I wanted to save some money to return home. If I had had money of my own, I would have returned home straight after my escape. Then the police arrested me and I was deported (100).

From the lamentation, it is clear that many Nigerian ladies involved in the international sex trade did not go into it out of their volition. They are pushed into the trade by prevalent socio-economic pressures in Nigeria.

Besides, the dialogue exposes the itinerant nature of the international sex trade which sees victims moving from one country to the other.

The ladies are generally victims of circumstances who have unfortunately fallen prey to the snares of heartless syndicates and avaricious agencies that specialize in child trafficking and the international sex trade.

As naïve girls, they could hardly suspect the snares of their victims. In a dialogue with Nneoma, Efe reveals how she was unsuspectingly tricked and lured into international prostitution by an agency which promised to engage men and women for decent employment abroad (99). Nneoma equally left home with the prospects of getting a lucrative teaching appointment in the United Kingdom (126). These confessions expose some methods and strategies employed by the sex-traffickers. Other methods identified by the writer include: promises of better educational opportunities and improved conditions of living.

It is the conviction of the writer that loss of societal values, mass unemployment, joblessness, social injustice and the general harsh economic situations in Nigeria aid and abet prostitution and the international sex trade. Efe corroborates this view as she reveals to Nneoma in dialogue: "I was out of the country for about seven years. My family was poor; it was a struggle to put our meals on the table. Only my elder sister and I went to college. My three brothers dropped out before they finished primary school" (98).

Through the experiences of Nneoma, Adimora-Ezeigbo lamentably identifies unemployment and structural injustice as the major factors that push some Nigerian ladies into international prostitution. As a holder of the National Certificate of Education, Nneoma could not get a job in her country (90). Her financial predicament and future ambition are further eclipsed when her father, who had retired from his civil service job, took to alcohol because he could not be paid his retirement gratuity several years after retirement (71). Alice's experiences further lend credence to the point as she explains: "I am a graduate with a good degree. If I had had a job I wouldn't have been trafficked, I wouldn't have ended up in this horrible place. I wouldn't have been deported" (163).

Through characterization Adimora-Ezeigbo identifies societal collapse, the separation of loved ones and emotional dislocation as some ugly effects of the heinous international sex trade and human trafficking on the Nigerian society. Adayi (Nneoma's mother) and Ogukwe Eke, (her father) are not only disappointed and isolated, but psychologically fractured by the sudden disappearance of their daughter, Nneoma, into an unknown destination. Even as a low income earner, Ogukwe Eke had worked hard to send his children to school (Nneoma inclusive) and tried to fend for his family. As a favourite and cherished child, Nneoma's sudden disappearance from home was thus traumatic to her father. The narrator observes that her sudden disappearance, without the consent and approval of her parents, was frustrating, embarrassing and disappointing to them as "she was the only source of relief and hope for a better life for them" (20).

Ofomata is equally emotionally traumatized following Nneoma's involvement in the international sex trade. Before her disappearance, Ofomata had paid her bride price. They loved themselves dearly and their plan for marriage was approved and blessed by their respective families (75). The writer captures Ofomata's emotional dislocation in the character's reminiscences thus:

But where could she be? Where had she been hiding all these years? It had been six years or a little less since she disappeared without a trace. Yet it seemed only yesterday, because it was still clearly etched on his mind. No day passed without his thinking of her. (36)

Depression and withdrawal from society are identified as other effects of the international sex trade its victims have to contend with. Nneoma, for instance, upon deportation from Europe, is reluctant to go to church and other public places for the fear that someone might recognize her as an ex-international sex vendor. (88 – 89)

Adimora-Ezeigbo's characterization of the oppressed and exploited further illuminates other effects of the international sex trade on the Nigerian ladies. While some are exposed to death, others are reduced to domestic slavery. Because the girls are illegally emigrated to Europe, they have neither passports nor visas.

Their non possession of these vital travel documents is a deliberate scheme by the traffickers to keep their victims in perpetual custody, and to make fruitless of any escape attempt. Meanwhile, the woes of the ladies start right at the point of departure as they are stowed away at the back of the plane where they are kept close to the toilet of the plane. At this location, they have to contend with the "foul smell" that oozed out from the toilet compartment (2 – 3).

However, Adimora-Ezeigbo invests in the ladies attractive qualities that appropriately befit them as international sex materials for trafficking. Their youthful ages and beauty are irresistible to their prospective sex - customers. They are educated and none is above eighteen. The writer observed of Nneoma, for instance, "her beauty made men to slave to passion when they saw her" (170). Meanwhile, Dr. Okeli describes Nneoma as "the beautiful and intelligent young Nigerian girl" (179).

In Europe, the girls suffer arrest, detention and deportation. For instance, in Southwest London, Nneoma and fifteen other Nigerian girls are arrested and detained on account of their illegal stay in London as prostitutes. At the tender age of eighteen, Nneoma's daily routine, while in Italy, was traumatic and pathetic. In

a dialogue, she reveals to Efe, how everyday, she had to hit the night, waiting for customers, winter, spring, summer and autumn; come back at dawn, wash, eat and sleep till it all begins again at night fall (129).

Commenting on the ordeal of the ladies in Europe, Nneoma, in a dialogue, sums up the experience thus: “Life is hell in Europe – we are always walking the night, selling sex to Italian men and foreigners” (128 – 129).

The setting in Nigeria explores the ladies’ frustration, shame and the humiliation of deportation. This is evident from the thought processes of Nneoma as captured by the omniscient narrator thus: She [Nneoma] glanced at the other girls and saw a mixture of fear, anger, sadness and disappointment in their faces.... She had left with so much hope and aspirations; now she was returning in shame and hopelessness (12).

Through character introspection, the narrator further explores Nneoma’s humiliation and violent psychological crisis as in the following:

Nneoma had decided that she would maintain a low profile and try to shield her identity from prying eyes and ears.... She would have liked to use a false name. The last thing she wanted was her family or anyone who knew her finding out she was in a rehabilitation centre for trafficked women. (50)

Nneoma further illuminates her frustration in Italy as she continued to slave in order to pay off Madam Dollar to regain her freedom. She recalls:

So I walk the streets of Rome for Madam Dollar for three years and still she claims I have not repaid my debt. There is no hope of escape. I do not speak Italian, I know no one in the city. I fear the police like plague as I don’t have valid documents. So I remain with Madam Dollar, biding my time, dreaming of freedom (131).

Adimora – Ezeigbo does not merely romanticize the deported trafficked ladies. She is quick to point out that some were bent on towing the ignominious path of prostitution in spite of the reformatory efforts of the Oasis Centre. This realistic presentation is explored in the characters of Alice and Efe. Alice is expelled from the Centre because she brought her boy friend to her room; an offence against the standing regulation of the Centre. Besides, both Alice and Efe would often leave the Centre to meet their boyfriends in town. Such deviant and obstinate behaviours exhibited by the ladies could be seen as hangovers from the sex-slavery experience which they had been lured into.

The episodic settings of the novel complement thematic exploration and the writer’s realization of narrative intention. Through such settings, which see victims moving from one country to another, the nature, pattern and transnational colouration of the sex trade are illuminated. The settings in both London and Italy explore the experiences of the ladies in Europe. The dastardly nature of the trade, its migration pattern and effects on young Nigerian ladies are equally exposed through setting. For instance, besides prostitution, the trafficked do other menial jobs such as catering assistants and dishwashing. Sadly, even the proceeds realized from such demeaning ventures are confiscated by their exploiters.

The settings are equally modes of character delineation. Through the interactions the ladies have with their victims, the latter are exposed as barbaric, exploitative and morally depraved personalities. The moral depravity and inhumanity displayed by such oppressor characters become a strong statement about the western society as that which is egocentric, dehumanized and luxuriates in naked exploitation and oppression.

The setting in London partly supports the view that some trafficked Nigerian ladies are naturally good people, but have been unfortunately pushed into international prostitution because of the prevalent harsh economic and structural injustice in Nigeria. For instance, while in London, Nneoma resisted (although with little success) men’s persistent attempts to lure her to bed (157). She preferred, “doing something less demeaning and humiliating than walking the streets or living in a flat where she was a sex object for every male” (159).

Several acts of indignities, humiliations and human degradation are perpetrated on the ladies as revealed through setting. For instance, while in Europe, in defiance to the African way of life which places premium on decency, integrity and dignity, indecent dressing and similar conducts are imposed on the trafficked ladies by their employers. The narrator reveals how, in Rome, for instance, “Madam Dollar had insisted on dressing her girls in revealing clothes so as to ensnare customers” (267).

In spite of the variegated challenges experienced by the trafficked, Adimor–Ezeigbo invests in some the spirit of hardwork, ambition, perseverance and the determination “to get on” with life in the new course they have charted for themselves. For instance, both Nneoma and Efe are determined to take advantage of the opportunities provided at the Oasis Centre to learn a trade. At the end of the training, they are gainfully employed. Besides, Nneoma is determined to further her education. Her success in the JAMB examination and subsequent admission into the University are all products of sheer determination and hard work. The determination and successes of the trafficked ought to be seen as a lesson to other young Nigerian ladies never to give up even when life situations appear to be intractable and traumatic.

The settings in London and Italy explore the bestiality and moral bankruptcy of their victims. While some customers reject the use of condoms, others prefer oral and anal sex. The narrator observes that Nneoma

and the other trafficked ladies were slept with in cars, public gardens and in fields. Quite often, they are physically abused and heartlessly thrown out by their clients when they “fail to cooperate”. Their failure to bring in enough money was equally visited with insults and severe beatings by their employers.

The setting in Nigeria, at the Oasis Youth Centre for Skills Development (OYCSD) avails Adimora-Ezeigbo the opportunity to make strong statements about what ought to be done for deported trafficked Nigerian ladies. While supporting the efforts of the Nigerian Government in fighting the illegal trade through advocacy, access to education and anti sex-slavery and human trafficking legislations, it is the candid opinion of the writer that deportees from the international sex market should be adequately rehabilitated through institutions and agencies. Such agencies and institutions could be established by the Government, Non-governmental Organizations, religious bodies and by public spirited individuals. Such established agencies, as Mrs. Nike Oderinde of the OYCSD explains, should aim at “empowering young women... who have taken a wrong step in life, but are willing and determined to change direction”(51).

In the spirit of realistic rehabilitation, the emphasis of such agencies should not be on digging into the ugly past of the trafficked ladies. Neither should it be on blaming the victims for their actions. It should be aimed at encouraging the trafficked to get on with life. One of the projection characters, Mrs. Oderinde, succinctly corroborates this position as she speaks to the ladies at the Oasis Centre: “We do not bother with what led to you being trafficked. What we care about is what you do with your life from now on. That is what matters” (51).

The rehabilitation processes and activities, in the opinion of Adimora-Ezeigbo, should include capacity building through seminars, workshops, motivational talks, entrepreneurship education and skills acquisition training programmes in areas such as: hairdressing, catering cosmetology and tailoring. To the writer, such skill acquisition programmes, in the opinion of Adimora-Ezeigbo, would avail the ex-trafficked the necessary psychomotor skills that would assist them to amend their shattered psyche and get on with life.

Rather than face stigmatization and rejection, Adimora-Ezeigbo calls on the government, parents, families and the larger society to unconditionally accommodate and reintegrate the deportees into the society.

This instructional objective is explored in the warm reception enjoyed by Nneoma as she finally decides to reunite with her family. Members of her family warmly receive her in varied ways as captured in the following description: Upon sighting her, Mma, for instance, excitedly “chucked away the piece of yam she was about to put in her mouth and ran forward. She fell on Nneoma and nearly threw her to the ground. Both of them were laughing as if they had always laughed so heartily and the absence of more than six years had not existed” (247 – 248).

Like the father of the proverbial prodigal son, Nneoma’s mother, Adaezi, on the other hand, hugged her and uttered happily, “Welcome, my daughter.... My chi has blessed me today. My child has returned to me.

She pressed Nneoma to her bosom. These eyes that have seen you this day will not go blind” (249). In the same vein, the ex-trafficked, in the opinion of the writer, should be willing to show remorse, and apologize to their families and societies for their shameful actions. This instructional object is explored in the character of Nneoma who humbly apologizes to her family saying: “I’m sorry I gave you so much pain by going away and not keeping you in touch.... I’m sorry I ran away but I’m back now” (257)

From the experiences of the ladies, the writer makes bold to proffer some suggestions and strategies as solutions to the menace of the international sex trade and child trafficking. These include self-employment as governments, at all levels, may not have the required resources and capacities to provide jobs for all citizens.

The inculcation of entrepreneurship education in the curriculum of the nation’s educational system would equally be a viable strategy. It is equally the candid opinion of the writer that ladies of marriageable age should get married and settle down. This would remove their vulnerability to the temptations of leaving the shores of Nigeria for greener pastures.

Although the widespread depravity, avarice and rapacity currently experienced in Nigeria can hardly be legislated against, it is the candid opinion of the writer that the international sex trade in Nigeria could be tackled should government, at all levels, fight corruption, reduce unemployment and invest more in social service provisioning.

Narrated from the point-of-view of the hapless exploited ladies, Adimora-Ezeigbo condemns the stigmatization of the trafficked as exemplified in the attitude of Chief Amadi who terminates Nneoma’s appointment upon the discovery that she was once involved in the international sex trade (273). Meanwhile, the shame and distrust experienced by the lady ought to be seen as one after-effect of the sex trade experienced by many young Nigerian ladies who are or had been involved in the sex-trade.

The central theme of the novel has influenced language use. Language could be insulting and unfriendly as in when the trafficked ladies interact with their oppressors and the security personnel. For example, one of the immigration officials barks at Nneoma, “Shame on you.... Go and join the rest of the scum who flew in from Rome a few minutes before you” (17). Such negative use of language aimed at talking down and expressing judgment against victims of the sex-trade is abhorred by the writer.

Language could take the question and answer structure as in when Nneoma was arrested in London and interrogated by immigration officials (15 – 16). However, an air of affection, love and friendliness characterize language use as in when officials at the Oasis Centre are determined to assist the trafficked to rebuild their broken sides and chart a new course of life. This friendliness is also evident in the dialogue involving Dr. Okeli and Nneoma.

The central conflict between the trafficked and their masters is resolved in favour of the former. Although through deportation, the ladies have succeeded in escaping from the jaws of their heartless exploiters and tormentors to reunite with their families. Back home in Nigeria, they end up on a more decent state of living after the successful skill acquisition training programmes at Oasis. For instance, while Efe is gainfully employed and successfully married, Nneoma's dream of going to the University is realized. At the University, she miraculously reunites with Ofomata, her heartthrob (309).

III. Conclusion

The paper examines Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's artistic response to the causes, nature and effects of the international sex trade on Nigerian ladies and on the nation at large. While socio-economic pressures and the general dislocation in societal values are identified as some fundamental factors that drive some Nigerian youth into the illegal sex trade, humiliation, emotional dislocation and social stigmatization are explored as some negative effects of the phenomenon.

To mitigate the effects of the trade on Nigerian ladies, and to forestall its prevalence, the paper agrees with Adimora-Ezeigbo on the need for the Government, Non-governmental Organizations and public spirited individuals to establish rehabilitation centres to teach the youth some basic entrepreneurial skills that would make them creators of wealth and job. Concerted efforts should also be made to reintegrate ex-trafficked and international sex vendors into the society.

References

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