

**THE DISREPUTABLE FATE OF THE HEROINE IN THE NIGERIAN FICTION:
THE PERSPECTIVES OF AKACHI ADIMORA- EZEIGBO IN *TRAFFICKED* AND
BUCHI EMECHETA IN *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD***

Andrew Ibeawuchi Nwagbara

Department of English Language and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria
ai.nwagbara@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Of concern is the manner in which many writers of fiction in Nigeria have found it attractive subjecting the female protagonists to untold psychological and emotional tortures in their various creative narratives while it's true that the pervading mood in Nigeria has been that of crass poverty and hopelessness which cut across genders, the woman or girl-child has been singled out for special attention. This intellectual exercise looks at the traumatic experiences of female protagonists in Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The choice of these two female writers is deliberate. The two writers represent two different generations of Nigerian female writers. While Emecheta discusses the plight of the female folks during the colonial era in Nigeria, Adimora-Ezeigbo focuses attention on female trafficking which is a current issue in the public domain. In the consideration of the effective application of the trauma theory, Emecheta has been exemplary in subjecting the female protagonist of her novel to series of agonizing tortures that culminate in her death. Adimora-Ezeigbo has however been benevolent; the central character of her creative work has several moments to celebrate and in the end her story ends on a good page.

Keywords: fate, heroine, feminism, female protagonist

Introduction

It is of note that the female writers of fiction in Nigeria have contributed positively towards the growth of the genre. These writers using various themes have helped expand the frontiers of discuss in the genre. From gender related issues to deep rooted socio-political agenda, these feminine writers have narrowed the gap that hitherto existed between them and their male counterparts in literary outputs. Despite the diverse concerns that the female novelists have shown on different issues of interest to Nigerian literate audience, it is however of note that they have focused more attention on matters of interest to the plight of the Nigerian woman or girl child. They have subsumed the feminine theme in their treatments of broad topics like the civil war in Nigeria, corruption that pervades the Nigerian landscape or even the class struggles that exist in some Nigerian societies. Female fiction writers like: Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta for instance, have discussed the different shades of psychological assaults that the female protagonists have endured in different Nigerian societies.

Perhaps, it is true that the female central character in Nigerian fiction is prone to tragic ends. Afam Ezeaku while quoting Alkali confirm that "tradition Africa was not a haven for African woman....She had and still has her life spiked with harmful traditional and social practices strong enough to denigrate sexual exploitation, arranged marriages, seclusion, infanticide, female circumcision and starvation" (18). In the ancient time, women were cast in the shape of evil. Charles Korie's opinion lends credence to this when he observes that "from Greek mythology, the odds are against women" (72). He further observes that the images of women in these mythologies are cast in "low, inferior, wicked and demonic posture" (72). To Nawal El-Saadawi the female character in the view of the Arabs is "a capricious vamp, a playful and beautiful slave, a she-devil imbued with a cunning and capable of a thousand artifices, an

explosive danger versed in all the arts of deceit and conspiracy.” (521). These views seem to have shaped the psyche of some Nigerian writers who have clothed the female characters in tragic garbs. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Buchi Emecheta have found this portrait attractive in *Trafficked* and *The Joys of Motherhood* respectively.

The central characters in these novels are archetypes of the doomed fate of the female characters in Nigerian fiction. They are however courageous, determined and resolute to turn their adversaries into triumphs. These are some of the qualities of heroines. A heroine in medieval history is the “legendary woman having the qualities of a hero” (wikipedia.com). Similarly, the Doris Lechner sees the heroine as a woman of distinguished courage or ability, admired for her brave deeds and noble qualities”. Nnu Ego and Nneoma in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Trafficked* respectively remain amazons who display exceptional courage even in the midst of extremely difficult situations to record worthy achievements. Despite their noble intentions and rugged determinations to succeed, they are like beings acting scripts written for them by unforeseen forces. This in common parlance is referred to as fate. Fate is “a power that supposedly predetermines events” according to Doris Lechner. If this assertion is considered sacrosanct, the female protagonists in these novels have their choices made for them by forces beyond their controls.

In the treatment of the female protagonist’s experiences by most Nigerian writers, the female central character has suffered tremendous bruises in physical and more importantly psychic dynamic. It is this trauma of the female central character that will be the focus of this research paper. Even though it is not extremely necessary to anchor every literary criticism on a literary theory, this literary discuss will draw huge inference from the trauma literary theory as published by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative and History*. Caruth while doing a critique of Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* cites Freud who paints a picture of human suffering as being ‘inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals’(Caruth, 14). Freud finds it difficult to comprehend the reason that catastrophic events keep repeating themselves in the lives of individuals who have experienced them before. Difficult to understand is that these tragic experiences are not initiated by the individuals own acts but are “a serious of painful events to which they are subjected and which seem to be entirely outside their wishes or control” (15). Therefore, the lives of the female central characters in *Trafficked* and *The Joys of Motherhood* are examined in the light of the above postulations of Caruth’s as encapsulated in the classical text *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative and History*. This research discusses the various traumatic narratives, the central characters have been subjected by the two female novelists and the manners they are able to navigate through these various tragic upheavals. Dalley in the use of this trauma theory has done a critique of a Nigerian war friction *Song for Night* by Chris Abani where he “evaluates the use of trauma as a paradigm for interpreting Nigeria civil war literature”. He draws the conclusion that in this child-soldier narrative Abani explores the novel’s “formal qualities, temporal disjunction, repetition and communicative ambivalence”

A Comparative Inquest into the Disreputable Fate of the Heroine in *Trafficked* and *The Joys of Motherhood*

Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* in a free flowing narrative describes the experiences of a female protagonist whose life oscillates from one tragic moment to another. Nnu Ego the female tragic protagonist from the beginning is captured as a character who finds herself in a state of helplessness, confused and frustrated. With the effective use of flash back, Emecheta without any pretense, puts the reader in an eager mood to know how the tragedy of her life will unfold. Amazingly, the mood of anxiety created at this point by the writer is

sustained till the end of the story. The reader is eager to know the next tragic encounter the central character will be involved in.

The novel *Trafficked* by Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo has engaged the attention of various shades of intellectuals since it was published in 2008. This is essentially due to the fact that the issue of female trafficking has remained topical in Nigeria and Africa. The problems associated with illegal migration from Africa to Europe have been discussed at various global assemblies. The politics of illegal migration is not the interest of this academic endeavour, but the traumatized experiences of the central character in this fiction and matters arising from them. Mathias Nder, in his discussion of *Trafficked*, looks at the experiences of the Nigerian ladies who are involved in international trafficking and prostitution. Through the use of characterization, he identifies two major character classifications in the novel. These are the oppressed and the exploiters. To him, the oppressed represent the “exploited and victims of sex trade”. The exploiters and oppressors on the other hand are the “collaborators and perpetrators of the international sex trafficking and prostitution.” Nder in his research also considers Adimora- Ezeigbo use of the various settings like: London, Italy and Lagos to expose the “dastardly nature of the trade.” For him, this migration pattern has devastating effects on the trafficked girls. The tilt of this research is in examining the reason for women oppression and discrimination in our society and (how) this encourages the liberation of all women.

Emecheta in situating her novel during the colonial period informs the reading audience that the travails of the female folk did not start recently. The protagonist is made to inherit a female ‘chi’, a reincarnated slave girl who inflicts tremendous punishment on Nnu Ego in this fictional narrative. The story of this slave girl is a recast of one of the most primitive cultures of the Africans where an innocent girl must be buried alive with her dead mistress. This culture of savage impunity is present in this novel with the central character being the beneficiary of a hideous crime committed by her forbearers with a fate of prolonged psychological agony and physical torture in the entire novel.

From conception, Nnu Ego’s story is shrouded in mystery. As a product of a illicit love affair between her mother Ona and Agbadi Nwokocha, her fate is tainted from birth. Her mother is expected to give birth to a boy who will take charge of the homestead of his maternal grandfather, Obi Umunna This woman who is fortunate to have a male child. Rather than give birth to a male child. “This child is the slave woman. Who died with (the) senior wife (of) Agunwa” (Emecheta, 25). On a gives birth to Nnu Ego who inherits the ‘chi’ of a slave woman. This woman out of spite and anger had promised Agbadi that she would come back to his household, but as a daughter. The anger stems from the fact that she is buried alive with her late mistress so as to continue being her slave in the grave. The slave woman in the African cosmic realization reincarnates as Nnu Ego with all the anger and bitterness inflicted on her by the culture of the native Ibuza community. The link that exists between the living and the dead becomes manifest from the beginning of the prose fiction. In the cause of the novel, the writer constantly draws a parallel between Nnu Ego and the slave woman. At every critical moment in her life, the spirit of the slave woman decides the scope of her suffering. The spiritual relevance of the dibia cannot be divorced from the cosmology of the natives in this fictional story. It is the dibia who at the birth of Nnu Ego spiritually diagnoses the need to appease the spirit of the slave woman to help mitigate the sufferings of the central character. “The slave woman was properly buried in a separate grave, and an image of her was made for Nnu Ego to carry with her” (26). Without this spiritual atonement, the spirit of the dead slave woman would have fomented Nnu Ego ad infinitum. This spiritual atonement and other sacrifices therein, help soften the revenge mission of the dead salve woman. Subsequently, the protagonist

benefits from these sacrificial interventions and records some flashes of good fortunes in the novel. She gives birth to several children after the fatality of her first marriage. Also, despite a prolonged suffering session, her sons excel in academics and become pathfinders in Ibuza town.

Adimora –Ezeigbo in her novel begins with a profound prologue that lays an enduring foundation for the narrative: “Chronic poverty, violence against women and girls, lack of decent work opportunities, coupled with restrictive migration and immigration policy have all played their roles in creating multinational trafficking industries – Louisa Waugh.” (Adimora –Ezeigbo,iv). In the above quotation, Louisa Waugh holds an opinion that shares the same sentiments that have sustained the multinational female trafficking industry that include: chronic poverty, violence against women and girls, lack of decent work opportunities and obnoxious immigration policies. Also, the novelist in lifting a passage from the Holy Bible lays a moral and ecclesiastic framework that makes covetousness a prima facie crime which leads to greed. The Holy Bible says “Take heed, and beware of covetousness, for a man’s life consisted not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” With this and the earlier quotation, Adimora – Ezeigbo sets the narrative on a free flow somersault of intrigues and emotional torture of the female protagonist, Nneoma. She subsequently skillfully lays bare the horrendous and laborious life the central character’s family goes through in the theatre of financial poverty.

As a little girl in Ihitte-Agu, she knows the colour of poverty “on the highway of life “(7). This experience this makes her journey in search of greener pasture abroad very necessary. The question the reading audience will ask is, why must she be the child to take up the fight to pull the family out of economic morass? She is not a man. But, Mother Nature has assigned a special role to her from birth. In the African cosmology, she is the reincarnated mother of her father Ogukwe Eke. She shares a similarity with Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* as a product of a reincarnation process. In the case of Nneoma, in tandem with the African culture, no mother allows her children suffer from deprivation. Therefore, it is not out of place that she carries the burden of ensuring that her family comes out of crass poverty. Her marriage to Ofomata is her first attempt at finding a solution to one of the major problems bedeviling her family; that of a piece of land to build a house.

For Nnu Ego also, her good fortune begins with her marriage to Nnaife, a man of poor physical appearance who works with a colonial officer as a domestic servant in Lagos. Her first marriage to Amatokun earlier was childless. Ngozi her first son to Nnaife dies not long after conception. Devastated though, she however remains undaunted. Her sadness does not endure for long before she gives birth to Oshia. In all, she gives birth to nine children with seven surviving. Of these, she has three sons; Oshia, Adim and Nnamdio. These male children represent her world because in the traditional Nigerian society, the woman who has no sons is deemed to have no children. Worse still “a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman”(65).

As typical of the Nigerian woman, Nnu Ego dreams of her sons being more successful than their father. As expected of a good wife, she supports her husband in the upbringing of the sons believing that the daughters need little education because they are bound to end up in the kitchen. In her quest to offer her sons the best that her family’s limited resources can offer, this indomitable Amazon never ascribes “profundity to the ordinary” (137). Despite the discomfort of sharing her husband with another woman in a polygamous environment, this home grown daughter of Ibuza is satisfied occupying the enviable position of a senior wife and the mother of her husband’s first son. She believes that “a happy senior wife makes a happy home”(138).

This role has its burden because she is a prisoner “imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife” (153). Society however expects her as the mother of three sons “to be happy in her poverty, in her nail-biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags.” (187). As an individual who has foresight, the education of her sons is a worthy investment because in the future “only pen and not mouth could really talk” (201).

On the other hand, Nneoma’s travails in *Trafficked* stem from poverty and cultural inhibitions. She and Ofomata are childhood lovers whose marriage is stage managed between Mazi Ogukwe Eke and his friend, Mbonu Ezenwa, fathers of the duo. This marriage apart from permanently cementing the bond of friendship between the two men, will help Ogukwe solve a pressing need, that of securing a piece of land to build a house. For a piece of land from his prospective in-law is part of the marriage rites. But this union between the two lovers experiences a hiccup from inception. It is the cultural title of ‘ozo-nkwu’ that becomes a hindrance. Quintessential Ezeigbo introduces this to exacerbate the conflict in the novel and make the heroine Nneoma walk a tight rope of financial emancipation. Ofomata is to inherit the mystical title of ‘ozo-nkwu’ from his father at his demise. Nneoma does not want to be the wife of a man of such appellation. The inability of the love birds to resolve this conflict leads Nneoma in making the choice to seek for greener pasture abroad. In search of a new lease of life, she desires for a teaching employment overseas. As a trained teacher desirous of a honest employment in Europe, she falls prey to a syndicate who offers her a fake teaching employment. To make her and her co-travellers believe the offers are real, the traffickers “show us pictures of the schools where we’ll be teaching and give us appointment letters signed by people with English names.”(127).

The triumphant catastrophic experience of a heroine largely depends on the influence of the men she associates with. Adimora-Ezeigbo does not fail to highlight the point that the achievements of Nnu Ego cannot be divorced from the positive relationships she enjoys with some men in her life. Her late father, Agbadi, Nwokocha remains a pillar of support in the early gloomy period of her traumatic life. After her failed marriage to Amatokwu, it’s her father Nwokocha Agbadi who helps restore her emotionally stable. To appease her supposedly tormenting ‘chi’, “he told her through the rising smoke of the slaughtered animals that he had stopped dealing in slaves and had offered freedom to the ones in his household” (34). For those slaves who have refused to go back to their villages are adopted as his children. All these concessions are made “for Nnu Ego” (35). Her second husband Nnaife Owulum helps her restore her motherhood after her first disastrous marriage. Even with Nnaife, misfortune continues to trail her. Her first son Ngozi dies mysteriously. In her quest to commit suicide over this calamity, the society agrees “that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman” (65). The subsequent son she bears for Nnaife helps her establish a permanent foothold in the Owulum family and also become the icing on the married cake. For “her love and duty to these sons were like her chains of slavery” (209). Even in her death, she gives them her soul because “they will worship my dead spirit to provide for them” (210). The culmination of her agony is expressed in her copious lamentation that:-

I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That’s why when I lost my first son I wanted to die because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband – and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we charge all this,

it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build. (210).

Nneoma the heroine's encounter with the men slightly differs from that of Nnu Ego. The similarity between the duo is the unalloyed love they enjoy from their fathers. Their subsequent heinous encounters with the male characters though similar in varying degrees, differ in traumatic contents. Despite being the mother of three brilliant sons and many daughters, Nneoma abandons Nnu Ego to marry a second wife. Nneoma's experiences in her various encounters with the male protagonists while abroad, highlight the unending injustices and exploitations that the female folks go through in the hands of men in the larger Nigerian society. In Italy, Nneoma realizes that she has been caught in the web of female traffickers. Here she becomes the 'property' of a vicious woman called Madam Dollar who engages her in prostitution to enable her pay the debt of bringing her to Italy. After three years of hellish living, she is sold to another kingpin of the cartel called Baron living in London who keeps her in a flat where "she (is) a sex object for every male" (59). Out of sheer luck and ingenuity, she escapes. While weeping outside the Russell Square rail station, Dr. Chido Okehi, a Nigerian scholar on leave of absence in London helps her into another phase of her metamorphosis of sexual trauma. While taking temporary shelter in the home of fellow Nigerians preparatory to her coming back to Nigeria, she continues to be sexually assaulted by Dimgba and Dotun her benefactor.

These heroic female protagonists however have not allowed their tortuous experiences dampen their desires to excel. Nnu Ego throws every strength of her being in the upbringing of her sons who become shining examples in the Ibuza community. Nneoma's desire to acquire a tertiary education is not dampened by her odious experiences as a trafficked girl. Despite all odds, she gains admission to study for a degree in a university in Lagos. It is very paramount to note that the two female novelists slightly vary with their pillages of painful activities of the two tragic heroines. Nnu Ego maintains a stoic personality in *The Joys of Motherhood* because she remains consistently courageous and optimistic even in the face of obvious psychological torture in the hands of the society and her husband, Nnaife. Throughout the entire gamut of the narrative, her sufferings remain unabated even when naturally she should be celebrated for her achievements that include her tenacity of purpose. Emecheta in her fulfillment of the tenets of the trauma theory keeps piling up all manners of torture on the protagonist which culminate in her death by the road side. "She died quietly ... with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her" (253). To make a mockery of her agonies; Emecheta titles the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. Adimora – Ezeigbo however differ from Emecheta's treatment of the female protagonist in her novel. Adimora – Ezeigbo in *Trafficked* offers Nneoma the opportunity of rehabilitation and reintegration into the society at Oasis Youth Centre, Lagos. She rather than overload Nneoma with a baggage of tragedies, expands "the threshold of (her) fulfillment" (235) by making her triumph at the matriculation examination to study Business Education at Lagos University of Science and Technology. In the midst of this achievement however, her ugly past as a trafficked girl resurfaces in her encounter with Chief Amadi. To him, a trafficked girl is not deserving of the friendship of his son Kelvin. Despite this emotional setback, she looks forward to realizing the dream of every traditional Nigerian woman; the dream of having a loving husband and a pleasurable family life. She however doubts the possibility of finding a man who would marry her with her filthy past. In her introspection, she wonders if she can find "a man she could love again – and one that would accept her as she was" (2006). However, the writer provides her a soft landing pad. Through Dr. Chido Okehi, she reconnects with her childhood heartthrob, Ofomata. The novelist admirably fails to bring the fictional narrative to an end with the female protagonist's entire life cycle being full of sad tales. Nneoma in the end

is rewarded with a university education and the prospect of marrying a childhood lover, Ofomata.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novelists have done well in their narratives while applying the tenets of the trauma theory. Emecheta in her exercise excels better than Adimora-Ezeigbo. Nnu Ego in Emecheta's story is physically and emotionally traumatized from the beginning to the end. She in line with the Freudian concept of persistent traumatization of certain individuals' subjects the protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood* to an overwhelming psychological torture. The reader at a point feels that the load of grief is too heavy for one individual to bear. Having two brilliant sons living abroad is enough to make her live a life of happiness in her old age. It is ironic that a woman who should be celebrated in the entire Ibuza community becomes an individual of ridicule. Emecheta in this novel leaves an evergreen tragic impression on the psyche of the reading audience.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's attempt differs slightly. Nneoma receives doses of good fortunes in the midst of her sad tale. While Emecheta's narrative leaves a prolonged agonized impression on the psyche of the reading audience, Adimora -Ezeigbo's novel continually reminds the reader the pitiable sojourn the youths of Nigeria nay Africa go through in search of greener pastures across the Mediterranean Sea. Today, many youths and parents have failed to learn lessons from tales similar to that of Nneoma that are captured in works of fiction, television movies and real life narrations of victims. Adimora -Ezeigbo in this story discusses an issue that has brought pain and agony in many families in Nigeria. The loss of lives at sea and the dehumanizing slave experiences these individuals like Nneoma go through in Europe are worse than slave trade of centuries ago. Good governance at all levels in Nigeria will create employments for the youths who will not see perilous journeys abroad as necessities.

These two female writers have handled the dilemma of their two female protagonists based on the cultural background they grew up in. The era they lived in has also affected their treatments of the common theme of female emasculation in the society. While Adimora-Ezeigbo has addressed a contemporary issue in the African continent, Emecheta's concern has been the plight of the female gender during the colonial period. Therefore, it follows that the agony of the woman or girl-child has persisted for ages.

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