

Ridiculing Our Dark Practices: The Exploitation Womanhood in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked and Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn*

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Abstract

In all ramifications, women cry out that they are exploited by the society. They are seen, not heard; their image battered and their roles not appreciated. This proposal is on the image and role of women mostly in African society, and especially in the Igbo society. Women cry out against exploitation, intimidation, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and all other attendant evils committed against them. In Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, young, innocent and naïve girls are taken advantage of, and sold out for prostitution and other money making ventures by those they trusted. At the end of the day, humiliation, dehumanization and even demented lives become the fate of women, contrary to expectations as can be seen in the cases of Nneoma, Efe, Alice, Fola and the others. Women are used, condemned and dumped by the men. So, it is envisaged that women, especially modern feminists, should look at the problems, not as a matter of fighting for rights and human beings. Lucia in Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn* cries against the inhuman treatment in widowhood that women face. The denials and humiliation as seen should be stopped as women deserve better life even after the death of their husbands. This paper advocates the emancipation of women, as well as calls for their proper integration in all facets of life in our societies.

Keywords: exploitation, emancipation, trafficking, domestic violence, prostitution, widow hood rites, dehumanization, tradition, womanhood

Introduction

Literature as a work of art mirrors the society; it speaks, affects and exposes the life of man through the experiences and challenges he faces in his immediate environment and the society at large. It also shows the responsibilities and limitations of being a female in a male dominated society. To Cornel O. Ujowundu in *A Guide to Studies in the Novel*,

A woman is often overwhelmed by the responsibilities in her life – those created by the society and those created by herself. She is expected to perform her traditional roles, efficiently run her home, and be a good wife, a super-mother, and a supportive member of the extended family income. And she must perform creditably at her job or business to be recognized or to make progress. And this task she has to accomplish in a culture where she is taught that she is inferior to her male counterpart (206).

Thus, women are traditionally regarded as mere tools of necessity; housewives, child bearers, home tenders and gratifiers of men's sexual passions. They are left out of decision-making processes in their communities. There are even certain things women are not supposed to do, which are reserved exclusively for men.

In the society, women were consistently bruised and brutalized. This was mostly imposed on them by their male counterparts. Women were regarded as the weaker vessels and also as sex objects and political pawns in the games played by men. Two instances are seen in the beginning of creation as recorded in the Bible, in the sense that God created the first man (Adam) before he created the first woman (Eve). The implication of this is that man is seen as the lord and hero to the women.

According to Ebere Ezenweke in her book *A Hindrance to Women Potentials*, "women have suffered tremendous marginalization and show of superiority complex in the past" (2). Many cultures of the world testify to this assertion. In this regard, she indicates that women's problems vary in the impact of negative cultural practices. In the same vein, Nworgu Patrick commenting on Ebere Ezenweke's claim, emphasizes that

Educationally, women are discriminated against. Parents prefer to send male children to school to the exclusion of the girls ... In the traditional society, women are not allowed to control their hard-earned income. It is considered normal for wives to hand over the hard earned money to their husband for proper control, disbursement or safekeeping. If the woman dares raise an objection to such unholy practice, she is maligned, cajoled and criticized as a social misfit. Such a woman may stand the risk of being sent packing (74).

To Nworgu, women are helpless in the society because they are "rightless" and voiceless due to the cultural practices of the past which still constitute serious conflicts in our contemporary society. All through history, the oppression of women is invariably constant, a part of global dilemma, ageless, systematic and deep rooted. Nmah Paul in his book *Women's Right in Igbo Land* states:

Igbo women, like the majority of Africa's population, are subject to inequalities in the political, social, economic and cultural fields. Women's attitude to their traditional role have varied from acceptance, that has tended to condition the non-utilization of formal guarantees of equality (4).

Women's potentials has unfortunately been limited and has not fully been tapped because of socio-cultural prejudices and practices. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is aimed at examining human trafficking, exploitation, dehumanization, oppression, sexual harassment, poverty, corruption and betrayal, which have eaten up the conscience of certain individuals in the country. From the novel, it was poverty that made Nneoma go in search of the job in which she was tricked into going overseas. Little did she know that she was to do an indecent job of prostitution. Ujowundu says that Nneoma was forced into prostitution in Europe against her wish. That she abandoned her fiancée and family for greener pastures abroad, not knowing that exploitation and betrayal await her there.

In *Echoes of a New Dawn*, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh exposed the evil deeds of this remote part of the society and absurd treatment given to women which many people have seen and are probably quiet about or have refused to admit because of fear. Lucia had to undergo painful mourning rites because of the death of her husband. She was given the watered used to wipe the corpse of her husband to drink so as to prove she had no hand in killing her husband. Anita, in comforting her, recounted her ordeal when she was forced to have sex with the chief priest and his two dwarf attendants, all in the name of

spiritual cleansing and had to live the remainder of her life with the reminder of that awful event by the presence of the child she beget in that one-time stand. Sometimes some of the women die of these maltreatments and it is concluded that they killed their husbands and the spirit of the dead has come for them, whereas the women probably could not bear it any longer.

Exploitation Through Trafficking in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* talks about certain girls – Nneoma, Efe, Fola, Alice, etc. - who were deceived on the idea of a better life, only for them to be taken overseas and turned into sex workers. The two women, Madam Gold and Madam Dollar, employed clever tricks or strategies which lured the girls into travelling with them. These tricks worked through the use of adverts, pictures of the schools which they were made to believe that they would work in, and also by issuing employment letters to them. As the novelist says, Nneoma narrated the story of her travel abroad to Efe thus:

For personal reasons, I fled from home one Friday morning without telling my family. A friend and classmate had told me some weeks before that some people had helped her secure a teaching appointment in the United Kingdom and she would introduce me to them and I could come with her (126).

Based on the assurance for a better job and the urge to help alleviate the poor state of her family, Nneoma innocently and ignorantly took the bait. She continues:

So I head for her hometown, which is near mine, to find out if the invitation is still open. It is, and we travelled to Lagos together to meet her sponsors. In no time, they got passports and flight tickets for us, and keep them. They showed us pictures of the schools where we'll be teaching and give us appointment letters signed by people with English names (127).

Such deceit readily influenced the naïve girls whose mindset was to secure gainful employment to help themselves and their families, not knowing that humiliation and exploitation await them abroad. Surprisingly to Nneoma, they were made to swear an oath with “a Bible and an image of an arusi” (128). This, she says, was so that they will not go contrary to the agreement reached. As she tells Efe:

We are six young women between the ages of seventeen and twenty. They tell us we will have plenty of time to pay back our debts to agency when we start earning money. While in Lagos, we relate with just two people, Eddie and Maria. Everything seems their younger sisters. I am so happy and thank my chi.
..The only thing that worries me is that we have to take an oath and they tell us the consequences will be severe if we disregard the terms of the agreement, disobey them or cut links without settling our debts ...(127).

Nneoma's sad experiences are similar to that of Efe. When they were at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Eddie and Maria withdraw as they were handed over to others who explained that Eddie and Maria were their Nigerian contacts, and that “they will get to Italy before travelling to Britain” (128). As Nneoma laments:

In Italy I discover I am trafficked. I have no say in the matter. There's a woman called Madam Dollar-nothing comes between her and money. She owns us and the man, whom we learnt to call Captain is her bodyguard. She keeps us prisoners in her flat. Life is hell in Rome – we are always walking at night, selling sex to Italian men and foreigners...
As soon as we arrive, she sells my friend. I have not set eyes on her since (128).

Nneoma feels dehumanized and devastated by the life she was forced to live while abroad as it was contrary to her expectations. As she tells Efe in the novel:

I am complete devastated by the life I'm forced to live: hit the night street, waiting for customers, winter, spring, summer and autumn. I come back at dawn, wash, eat and sleep till it all begins again at nightfall (129)

In fact, the novel started from the middle, when the trafficked girls were deported back to Nigeria. The author employed a flashback technique to give us an insight into the protagonist's childhood experiences; we were also introduced to her father Ogukwe Ekwe, who was a clerk in the Internal Revenue department in the Ministry of Finance before he retired and the mother Adaeze, a petty trader in the village market. Nneoma happens to be her father's stems in his belief that Nneoma was his mother's incarnate. So he pampered her a lot. The over pampering of Nneoma made her never to allow any of her siblings to sit on their father's leg whenever he is home.

Nneoma was beautiful and intelligent that she was betrothed to Ofomata, the first son of the rich Ozo Nkwu of Ihite-Agu village, and Ofomata would be the next Ozo Nkwu of Ihite-Agu at the death of his father. Nneoma decided to run away from home irrespective of the task ahead of her as the wife of the next Ozo Nkwu, and joined a number of girls in Lagos where they were selected as qualified teachers on the trip to overseas. The surprising things was that no single boy qualified in the interview. She left home without a word of her whereabouts to her family and this put her family in a sad mood, making them have sleepless nights and troublesome days without the hope of her return.

Nneoma's sensibilities were jolted badly as she found herself face to face with a completely different job assignment which earned her much beating and bruises each time she refused sex to Madam Dollar's customers. As she told her story to Efe, "sometimes, while we are standing in the red light area where other prostitutes line up, youths come shouting. *'puta puta!'* At such moments, I am completely overwhelmed by shame" (130).

She seved in madam Dollar's hotel as a prostitute for three years before she was bought and transferred by Baron to the United Kingdom (Uk). She was denied access to her documents and passport. She always received severe beatings from Baron any times she refused him sex. She was not allowed to walk on the street of UK alone. She only went out with Baron or those who paid baron for her sex services who later brought her home.

According to Nneoma as she recounted her sad story:

Baron sends the 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 want oral or anal sex and insist 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).

Nneoma ran away from the ear of baron on one of their trips and she left with some money and started roaming the streets of UK and was arrested by the immigration officers who discovered that she had no residential permits with her and she pleaded with them not to kill her, she was arrested together with other girls and after some time in the UK, they were deported back to Nigeria. Nneoma recounted how she escaped from Baron, how she met Dr. Chindo Okehi, the university lecturer, how she was caught and eventually deported to Nigeria and brought to the Oasis. According to her:

Many months later when he takes me out for shopping, I'm alert all the time with my money hidden in my clothes, ready to escape if an opportunity presents itself. On this occasion, he stops for a second to buy a newspaper and as soon as he turns his back I open the door gently and get out. I do look back until I have disappeared round the corner of the next street. I run and run and run until I'm out of breath. I have no idea where I am but I keep going in the direction opposite the place I left Baron (133).

Nneoma's escape was dramatic and even had divine connection as Baron and his cohorts could not locate her until she was deported. As she says in the novel;

I roam the city for two days until a Nigerian woman I meet, Chindo Okehi, takes me home. She is a university teacher. Later she introduces me to a Nigerian man, in whose house I live until the police raid. Within days, I am deported and brought to Oasis (134).

There was a bus awaiting the Trafficked at the airport which later conveyed them all to the Oasis Youth Centre for Skill Development (OYCSD) premises where they were given accommodation. This centre was owned by four women, though they got support from both government and private sectors. The girls were allowed to pick any trade of their choice and Nneoma picked tailoring while Efe took to hair dressing and they become close friends, hence they started discussing and sharing their problems.

Humiliating Widowhood Rites in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn*

Chuma-Udeh Ngozi's *Echoes of a new Dawn* is a novel centred on the traditional and barbaric oppression given to women all in the name of mourning their husbands. The author personally described it thus: "A retrogressive, pessimistic, outdated and useless culture" which should be abolished. We see women who are beaten, their hair are shaved, they are made to stay in a tattered hut with ashes all over their bodies for two weeks, they are made to take their bath with dirty water used in cleaning their dead husband's body after two weeks that is, if they are not forced to drink it. They are to sleep with the dead body of their husband and stay with it all through the night even though it already smells. They are even raped in the name of cleansing away spirits of the dead.

All these are done to women when their husbands die, but no one thinks about the men being put through the same shameful treatment when their wives die.

Chuma-Udeh used Lucia, a woman who was born in Lumais, to black American parents. She is not from Africa but married an-African man. She was used to expose man's inhumanity to man, all in the name of custom and tradition. The novels began with Lucia in the "morning hut of ashes" as they termed it. It was raining and Lucia got scared but she could not express herself for she is not to be heard. It is believed that a woman "sitting in ashes" does not have any opinion to express. She lamented: "Where is the long arm of civilization? Where has modern ... why a society. ... animals" (4)

As far as Ngozi was concerned, her character was asking these questions because she was actually being treated like an animal. She painted a painful picture of intimidating on a woman by her fellow women. The umuada are believed to be daughters of the family who came to take care of the activities of the burials to make sure everything is carried out in the right way.

They sit with the mourning woman, deny her everything, including her toiletries, which is every woman's necessity. The woman is reduced to a living dead. Lucia was engaged and humanized. She knew nothing about Africa before her marriage and the little she learnt did not help her prepare in any way for this dehumanizing way of mourning. She learnt a lot during her honeymoon, especially when her husband took her to the Gobaret Minaret at Katsina, there she learnt about Puradah where a woman is kept in seclusion and not allowed to see anyone, with "Bashiga" written on the door leading to her room.

Abdul explained to her:

It means "no entry" ... market place (26). She just could not believe it but Abdul went further to explain it, saying: it is the culture madam... our culture (27). "why should the society be so much against women (27).

Lucia asked these questions, not knowing the culture and traditions of her husband's village. She also learnt about female circumcision, which is very primitive and unhealthy. Women pass through all these without complaining. There is no one to speak for them and they are not heard and even when heard, their suggestions are not considered because they are women.

In this novel, Chuma-Udeh Ngozi exposed the evil deeds carried out on women. These women are treated this way with men watching them and ignoring the suffering but they won't allow such treatments on their wives at home. The daughters of the village do not even marry from their village for fear of the future. When Nez wanted to marry Celia, Nkemdiri's friend, who was from their village, Celia's mother refused because of the traditional mourning customs which were very terrible. Most women cannot stand to see their children pass through such punishment in the name of mourning.

All these are what women pass through and its more painful because the men are not treated alike. They are not humiliated, imprisoned and embarrassed in the name of mourning their wives.

Lucia had to meet other women who had passed through the *ikwa ajadu* rites to intimate her on their experiences. However, most of them were wallowing in fear and humiliation, but she was able to convince the three she met. They were Christians and two of them lived in the mission, which got Lucia to wonder the irony of how such barbaric and fetish traditions should exist side by side with church. The ugly satanic traditional rites turn most women into maniacs.

Anita told how she was raped by the chief priest and two dwarfs all in the name of cleaning, only to wake up in the hospital two weeks later pregnant with a dwarf. This was the result of spiritual cleaning.

The Ike sister also told how she was made to swear stark naked in the presence of the elders in a shrine just to prove her innocence. As if that was not enough, she was made to carry the basket containing the man's dead body and walk round her village. She was even to drink the water got from the cleansing of the decomposing corps of her husband, only for them to flee when they found out that her husband was not dead, that they have been punishing her ignorantly.

Chuma-udeh brought all these out to prove that women are human beings and should be treated as such. She exposed the evil acts and deeds of this remote part of the society and absurd treatment given to woman which many people have seen and are probably quite about or have refused to admit. Women are supposed to be the vital part of the society. They deserve respect and must be

listened to when they speak. She tries to tell the world that, women bear forth fruits and every man is born of woman. Therefore, any barbaric treatment given to woman must be stopped.

Looking at this novel, we see that women want to be heard and valued in the society. They are against the absurd treatment given to them in different communities and they want these to be stopped. They want the voices of woman to be heard and their suggestions considered.

Conclusion

Throughout history, woman have always struggled to gain equality, respect and the same rights as men. This has been difficult because of patriarchy, an ideology in which men are said to be superior to women. Women are seen as less important and do not have any say in the society and only good in bed, and to so many men as punching bag. This ideology has permeated the world and as a result, even in the new millennium, women are still struggling for rights that most men take for granted.

Hence, women are clamouring to be liberated from all forms of discrimination so as to enable them fit into the society, just as their male counterparts. In most societies and cultures, women are enslaved, subjugated, humiliated and dehumanized. The origin of this distorted view of women can be traced back to the ancient times. Even Aristotle in his poetics argued that “women were not full human beings and that the nature of women were not that of full human person” (88).

His view was that women by nature were defiant, not to be trusted and to be looked down upon. It is a universal phenomenon that women are not given equal rights with men and this led to their being subjected to many inhuman treatments in the society. Women are made to play the second fiddle-inferior role-in the society, family, social gatherings, politics and in national issues.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is principally the story of Nneoma, an intelligent teenager who was tricked into going abroad with the promise of a decent job. Spurred by the increasingly tightening grip of poverty on her lover and fled in search of the famed green pastures. She found herself forced to serve the sex market in Europe, and after eight years of abuse, she was deported back to Nigeria in shame and without a penny. Nneoma, a very beautiful and intelligent girl, the second child of her parents, and also her father's favourite, decided to flee the country due to her family's wretchedness at the age of 19 to make a living, only to get there and find out that she has been trafficked. When she discovered that she has been tricked, she did everything possible to get back home and she was deported back to Nigeria. In Nigeria, she could not stand the shame of her past life, i.e. her being forced to sell her body. As a result of that she passed through emotional trauma and finds it difficult to get back to her parents and her betrothed, Ofomata, who have even paid her bride price before her sudden disappearance.

In *Echoes of a New Dawn* by Chuma-Udeh Ngozi, it was all about a barbaric, outdated, retrogressive and useless custom. The author through during the burial rites of their husband, in the hands of the chief priest, the dwarf and umuada.

This stupid tradition made the women go through excruciating pains leaving them in sorrow. The novel showed how Lucia was able to push both the chief priest and his accomplice into the hole dug for her husband's corpse. The novel thus recommended a new dawn in the lives of the widows and Lucia was presented to us as the heroine of survival to the oppressed widow.

These novels, *Trafficked* by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and *Echoes of a New Dawn* by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh are true feminist campaigns and against the evils of marginalization of women should not abate until equality is won.

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