

ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION OF THE GIRL-CHILD IN A DIGITAL AGE: A STUDY OF AKACHI ADIMORAH – EZEIGBO'S *TRAFFICKED*

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Abstract

T*his paper highlighted the ill treatment of the girl - child by parents and the society. The phenomenon of trafficking and exploitation of the girl – child have become the most widely discussed social tragedies of our time. Scholars can note the considerable skill used by the author in portraying the plight of young girls in a merciless world dominated by greedy, irresponsible and often cruel men and careless parents in their lives. The abuse, domestic violence, exploitation and intimidation stare the helpless young maidens in the face as they cannot change their sad situations individually. It is therefore envisaged that the society especially parents of those children should look at the humiliation as a cankerworm that should be eliminated. The 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 their fate contrary to their expectations. The researcher made use of both primary and secondary sources in the gathering and analysis of data.*

Keywords: Trafficking, Exploitation, Prostitution, Humiliation, Abuse, Domestic Violence

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. The issue of gender is closely related with feminism, a movement which advocates the emancipation of women and the removal of all forms of inequality between male and female genders. The idea of gender was for the first time brought about in the 1970s by a group of feminists like Catherine Acholonu, Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and even Chimananda Adichie. The issue was to use the notion of it as a parameter for appreciating the fact that women do not relate to men because it presupposes a social construct against biological circumstances of men and women.

A girl child is described as a female child between infancy and early adulthood. During this period of the development of the girl child, she is under the custody and supervision of adults who may be her parents or guardians and siblings who are older and more mature than she is. The girl child is easily influenced by her experiences as she develops. She models her behaviour during this development process through observations and imitations of those she depends on, and her physical, mental and emotional development start and reach their peak within this stage. In attempting to establish the relationship between the society and the girl child, we ask certain pertinent questions relating to how the child is received and related with in her contemporary society. What are the struggles, challenges and oppression faced by the girl child? What are the factors that foist on the girl child such challenges and oppression?

From the family circle to the public sphere, the girl child has suffered much hardship and has been greatly dehumanized. This is due to the fact that she is regarded as inferior to her brother. She is devalued and as Buchi Emecheta portrays her, in her novel *Second Class Citizen*, she is a second class citizen in a society ruled by male chauvinism. In especially most African societies, the girl child has been consigned to an inferior status for which she constantly wears a daunted image. This inferiority is as a result of the patriarchal ideology in the society which bestows undue self-importance on the male child. The result of this is that, men do everything to undermine the women in order to arbitrarily institute value and ideologies in the society. The African society bestows importance on the male folks neglecting the female folks. This patriarchal ideology has influenced the way the girl characters are projected by male writers in their literary texts. In most literary works, female characters always wear one of these images: prostitute, girlfriend, courtesans, and workers and are evident in these novels: Clara is Obi's lover in Chinua Achebe's *No long at Ease*; Elsie in *A Man of the People* by Achebe is Odili's girlfriend and later becomes chief Nanga's girlfriend; and also in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, we see Olanna as Odenigbo's lover. These images of female characters to Helen Chukwuma's assertion that:

The female character in African fiction... is a facile lacklustre human being, the quiet member of a household only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters... Docility and-complete submission of will is demanded and enacted from her (131).

The construct portrays the girl character as a passive and inconsequential object. The male writers communicated a picture of the girl-child as one whose destiny is subject to the whims of her male folk. In other words, the girl-child lives under the shadows of the males in the society.

So, many literary artists in our society *try to* expose the humiliation and dehumanisation of girl children and womanhood by the traditions, and men of society and make efforts to redeem these deplorable conditions of women in their literary works. They also try to give answers to many questions raised on the girl-child/women's emancipation and the level **of success** achieved so far. African fiction is a reflection of the prevalent issues that are eating the bone marrow of the contemporary African society. These are literary works written by Africans in English language for everyone in the society to correct their mistakes or other social errors. Besides, female writers in modern African literature have before now gained stand in African literary world. They have attempted to emancipate African women in diaspora from the shackles of prejudice and subjugation meted on them by tradition, culture, norms, and all forms of mystical and diabolic beliefs governing the average African society. They now seem to reinstate and establish what seems to be their main interest which focuses on penetrating into the African literary world. Their aim is to examine the societies in Africa as well as to rid them of any practices that will mar the upraising freedom of women. In order to achieve this, they seek to promote their authored books or texts hence the female and male writers in modern African literature are focused on promoting peace and harmony in African continents.

Thus, in the novels by male writers like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, John Munonye's *The Only Son*, females are often regarded in Nigeria as the weaker personality in the value chain of human development. This orientation has led to demeaning and sometimes dehumanizing treatments against her in the hands of men who are in charge and in control of the order of the social and cultural institutions. All these have brought about the subservient classifications in which the female child has been confined in African societies. But in recent times, there have been efforts and advocacies by women and significant others like Akachi Adimora-

Ezeigbo and Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in *Children of the Eagle*, *The Last of the Strong Ones* and *Echoes of a New Dawn* to emancipate the situation of female children against the backdrop of traditional restrictions. This paper is concerned with the problems of the girl-child in the African world as seen in the texts under study. These efforts are geared to recognize, rehabilitate, and ultimately elevate the female children as the real custodian of the society's traditions and values. The paper advances that while tradition tries to undermine the status of the girl-child and women; this canvasses that without the noble role of women as the pillars of the society, cultural legacies would have been stuck in irretrievable quagmire or possibly lost forever.

In fact, women have been regarded as the weaker vessels and treated as such. It could be categorically stated that most of the male novelists make female characters play second fiddle as the custom demands. Women were discriminated against in virtually every aspect of life: educationally, sexually, socially, politically and otherwise. According to Ebere Ezenweke in her book *A Hindrance to Women Potentials* "The girl child as a woman has suffered tremendous marginalization and show of superiority complex in the past. A traditional orientation of many cultures of the world testifies to this assertion" (2). She indicates that women problems vary in the impact of negative cultural practices. From this view, women are helpless in the society due to the cultural practices of the past which constitute conflicts and tragedy in our contemporary society. This is a societal tragedy whereby a child is beaten and at the same time prevented from crying.

Nmah Paul in his book entitled *Women's Right in Igbo Land* he states that:

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

Thus, women are deprived most of their rights and their potentials are not easily acknowledged by the men who are prejudiced against them. The tendency to relegate women to the background becomes naturally a part of the patriarchal ideology of the society.

Some female writers like Amma Darko, Akachi Adimora –Ezeigbo, Sefi Atta, Yejide Kilanko and Kaine Agary have now decided to break the jinx concerning this biased judgment of women by the men.

Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, is a novel about Nneoma, alongside some girls who were tricked into prostitution, all in the name of going to work abroad. These girls as the narrator says in the novel, were brutalized, exploited and dehumanized and later deported back to Nigeria penniless. Also some others mentioned in the novel like Hannah; Nneoma's sister who went to live with Prophet Elias (a married man) without her bride price being paid and he continued molesting and battering Hannah until she left him and ran back to her parents. This study will look into the problems of trafficking and exploitation faced by the girl-child in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

The theoretical framework for this study is feminism. According to the *World Book Encyclopedia*, "Feminism is the belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men" (71). It is an organised activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. Cynthia Cockburn in book her *In The Way of Women* says that "the story of modern feminism began with the American Revolution in 1784 which embodies the aspiration for equality, liberty and fraternity, shaking the old feudal and monarchical order" (36). She further states that "the first feminist document was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 in which she opposed men" (36).

This phenomenon of girl – child humiliation, has become one of the most widely discussed social tragedies of our time. We are witnesses to a deluge of talks about the plight of these children, from newspaper articles, to radio talk–shows, television documentaries and elegant academic discussions. Many well–funded, well–attended workshops and conferences have been convened on the subject. Even government claims to be doing its very best to tackle the problem, yet in spite of all these well publicised efforts; the problem not only persists but seems to be getting more and more intractable.

The ideas of feminism have catered effectively to the movement of women for the achieving of social, political and educational emancipation of women and their equality with men. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn*, Amma Darko's *Faceless* and Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* like many others are examples of works along this part. They are works that arose as a response to the male dominated society that seeks continually to subjugate women and treat them as sub humans.

Trafficking and Exploitation of the Girl Child in Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is all about young girls who ran away from unfavourable circumstances at home, hoping to get rich abroad and come back to help their families but ended up being tricked into prostitution slavery abroad and later deported penniless. *Trafficked* raises related social issues that are all too – familiar to us in an equally familiar setting because there is always news on human trafficking where young girls are taken abroad and used as sex workers. As in the case of these girls – Nneoma, Efe and the rest of them who were deceived on the idea of a better life, only for them to get abroad and be turned into sex workers. The two women, Madam Gold and Madam Dollar mapped out strategies which they used in tricking those girls into travelling with them. These measures worked through the use of adverts and pictures of the schools which they were made to believe that they would work in, and also by issuing employment letters to them. According to the author, Nneoma narrates 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 to get a better job and the urge to help alleviate the poor state of her family, Nneoma innocently and ignorantly took the bait. As she goes on:

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 kept them. They showed us pictures of the schools where we'll be teaching and gave us appointment letters signed by people with English names (127).

Such deceit readily influenced the naïve girls whose mind set were to secure gainful employment to help themselves and their families, not knowing the humiliation and exploitation awaiting them abroad. Much to Nneoma's surprise they were made to swear an oath with 'a Bible and an image of arusi'. This was done so that they will not think of breaching the contract. As she narrates to Efe, thus:

We are six young women between the ages of seventeen and twenty, they tells us we will have plenty of time to pay back our debts to the agency when we start earning money. While in Lagos, we related with just two people, Eddie and Maria. Everything seems normal. They joke with us as if we're 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 told us that the consequences are severe If we disregard the terms of the

agreement, disobey them or cut links without settling our debts... (127)

On the case of Efe, they took them to a shrine, somewhere between Lagos and Ibadan, such barbaric act was the extent of humiliation they suffered in the hands of those traffickers. When Nneoma alongside others reached Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Eddie and Maria withdrew as they were handed over to others who explained that Eddie and Maria are their Nigerian contacts, and that they will get to Italy before travelling to Britain. As Nneoma laments:

In Italy, I discovered I'm trafficked. I have no say in the matter. Here'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 prisoner 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 arrived, she sells my friend. I have not set my 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 narrates her ordeal to Efe thus: “I am completely devastated by the life I'm forced to live: hit the street at night, 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).

Nneoma arrived Italy only to be surprised with a different job proposal and this earned her much beating and bruises as she refuses sex to Madam Dollar's customers. As she continues narrating her ugly experiences abroad to Efe thus: “Sometimes, while we are standing in the red light area where other prostitutes line up, youths come shouting, 'Putu Putu!' At such moments, I am completely overwhelmed by shame” (130). Nneoma served in Madam Dollar's hotel as a prostitute for three years before she was bought and transferred to Baron in the United Kingdom (UK). She was denied access to her documents and passport. She always received severe beatings from Baron any time she refuses to have sex with him. She was not allowed to walk on the streets of UK alone. She only goes out with Baron or those who paid Baron for her sex services who later brought her home afterwards. According to Nneoma as she recounts 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 his flat, and does not allow me to go out except when he takes me with him (132).

An opportunity she has been waiting for presented itself for Nneoma, when she went out one day with Baron and she grabbed it. Nneoma left with some money she was able to save which she carries everywhere she's going should an opportunity of running away present itself and started roaming the streets of UK and was arrested by the immigration officers who discovered that she has 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 recounts how she escaped from Baron, how she met Dr. Chindo Okehi, the university lecturer, how she was caught and eventually deported back to Nigeria and brought to Oasis, thus:

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 as soon as he turns his back I opened the door gently and got out. I did not look back until I have disappeared round the corner of the street. I 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 looks as if it has divine connection as Baron and his cohorts

could not locate her ever again. According to Nneoma:

I roamed the city for two days until a Nigerian woman I met 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).

Efe's own side of the story was almost like Nneoma's as she narrates her sad tale to Nneoma thus:

... 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. I have a younger sister and I hope she's still in school. She was ten when I left home. I was nearly nineteen (98).

Nneoma sighed: she too had been about that age when she left her family. As Efe goes on:

One day I saw an advertisement in a newspaper while I was on a visit to my cousin in Lagos. It asked young men and women who wished to work abroad to come to a certain address to be interviewed. You know how people longed to leave the country, especially during the military regime (99).

'They still do it don't they?' Nneoma interrupted. 'Sorry for interrupting. Please go on!'

I responded to the advertisement without my cousin's knowledge. The office seemed perfectly normal. Quite a number of people were interviewed the same day. Some were rejected, but I was selected. None of the men who were interviewed were taken. This would have alerted me to danger, but I barely gave it thought at the time. Anyway, before long, all the girls – ten of us – were given a travel schedule. We took an oath to work for the agency until we had paid our debts. They claimed they had spent a lot of money getting our passports and tickets (99).

Oh Lord, they always have the same story. Go on, Nneoma breathed

Well, to cut a long story short, we were taken to Italy and ended up in Palermo. It was terrible. I was sold to a woman called Madam Gold, a Nigerian. She was vicious. She uses us shamelessly, make us walk the streets every night (99).

Nneoma saw that Efe's story was very similar to hers – they had both been forced to sell their bodies to all comers. Tears ran down her face and she took Efe's hand, as Efe continues with her story:

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, you know the rest (100).

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 Trafficked were accommodated there and made to have new start in life and become useful to themselves, their families and the whole society at large.

Hannah, the elder sister to Nneoma, was not left out on the part of humiliation; but in her own case, she indirectly brought it on herself because she left home for the house of Prophet Elias who didn't even pay her bride price, she later went back home to her parents; who were very much against the union right from the onset, after spending futile years with her so – called lover; Prophet Elias, who subjected her to all manner of humiliation and maltreatment. The family were happy to have her back

home and wished Nneoma could as well come back home someday. Hannah narrates her ordeal in the hands of Prophet Elias thus: "... after whipping us (his so – called wives/ concubines), he asks us to his bed..." (182).

While in OASIS, the quest for going back to school has been the slogan of Nneoma and as such, she learnt so fast at the Fashion and Designing school. She started making and saving money that will take her back to school. She was later offered admission into the Lagos State University of Science and Technology to study Business Education and there she saw Ofomata whom she was previously engaged to, in the office of Dr. Chindo Okehi. Nneoma's family were so happy to see Nneoma again when she came back home.

Efe later left for her hometown when she finished learning her trade in OASIS and on getting to Benin, she started a new life, got married and settled down. Nneoma on her part works so seriously, she encountered a lot of problems that made her move from one place to another in search of jobs she could do to support herself in school. But it has been made known to some people that she was deported from Italy where she went for prostitution. Yet, she never gave up, she kept on struggling to realize her dreams of going to school and she later succeeded.

Conclusion

In this novel we can't help admiring the considerable skills the author used in portraying the plights of young girls in a merciless world dominated by greedy, irresponsible and often cruel men in their lives. Sadly, it is a tale of a diseased society that seems to have lost its hold on the lives of its children. It is a provocative tale of a society that has developed a tragic ability of guiding its young ones, especially the girl child, into a life dedicated to prostituting every conceivable virtue for the sake of flimsy material possessions.

Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is principally the story of Nneoma, a beautiful and 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 family, she decided to abandon her family and lover and fled in search of the famed green pastures, she found herself forced to serve sex market in Europe, and after eight years of abuse, she was deported back to Nigeria in shame and without a penny. In Nigeria she could not stand the shame of her past, but she later amended it, by gaining admission into a university; thereby actualising her dreams and later went and re – united with her family.

This is a wake-up call to us grandmothers/ grandfathers, mothers, but especially fathers. It is not enough to sow the seeds of human life, beyond it the future of our children, of our mortality ancestry awaits our constant vigilance and careful nurturing. No seed grows into harvest of joys without the planter's diligent labour of love.

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