

TRAFFICKING AND HUMAN DIGNITY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *TRAFFICKED*

By

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Abstract

*Human trafficking for commercial sex exploitation is a heinous crime against humanity. This modern-day slavery is particularly targeted at women and children and constitutes a greater percentage of the fastest growing criminal industry in the world today. The trafficked victims are often seen as mere chattels and are therefore objectified and treated as merchandise. They are deceived, drugged, coerced or even kidnapped before being trafficked. This study, however, critically analyzes Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and examines the ingrained social injustice in Nigeria and how the writer projects the image of the dehumanized woman. Using feminist and post-colonial theory, it gives an understanding of how systems of social inequality are created and sustained. It argues that the new wave of migration and the growing commodification of the female body sustain the increase in trafficking for sexual exploitation. Findings from this research further reveal that poverty, social inequality, exclusion, gender discrimination and power imbalance culminate in the increased vulnerability of these victims. The research identifies the causes of human trafficking and categorically states that it is an affront to human values and contrary to the principles of freedom and human dignity. It equally reinstates that the protection of humans particularly children and women from trafficking must be placed in the broader context of the promotion and protection of human rights. And in order to combat and eradicate this epidemic and social injustice, this paper concludes that state legislation with stiff penalties that criminalize this nefarious and barbaric act must be institutionalized.*

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Introduction

While slave trade was abolished long ago, it has been discovered that new and more subtle forms of slavery are alarmingly on the increase in many parts of the world. Among them is the human trafficking which is a crime against humanity, a grave violation of human rights, an atrocious scourge and the most worrying endemic phenomenon in the 21st century. In human history, there are some examples of societies that were founded on slavery and on the exploitation of some people who were considered by others to be less important and inferior. The ancient Greeks for example practiced slavery and considered it as morally acceptable, hence, the philosopher Aristotle said about slavery: "It is thus clear that just as some are by nature free, so others are by nature slaves and for these latter the condition of slavery is both beneficial and just" (14). But several groups, individuals, religions, instituted authorities have vehemently rejected, condemned and questioned this stance because every human has dignity and is entitled to some respect, concern, rights and protection. Human trafficking treats the human person as a commodity. It exploits the poor and the structures that cause poverty and it is an assault on human lives and dignity.

UN Definition of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is defined by the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (The Palermo Convention and Protocol) as follows:

"Trafficking in person" shall mean: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practice similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

The prevailing circumstances surrounding the trafficking of women, the terrible conditions under which they are generally forced to work, negate their dignity and violate their fundamental human rights, including the right to bodily integrity and effecting self-regulation.

Although men are also victimized, the overwhelming majority of those trafficked are women and children. Estimates show that between one and two million women and children are trafficked each year worldwide for forced labour, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. Salt states that "Trafficking in human beings especially women and children has become one of the most rewarding illegal economic activities and can be put at par with drug trafficking and arms smuggling" (np). This underground and illegal multibillion dollar business, escaped the public eye for a long time until it emerged as one of the top industries in the black market.

Literary writers have, however, used literary discourses that border on sexual slavery to bring to the fore that this modern day slavery is thriving despite all efforts to stop human trade several decades ago, that is, over three hundred and fifty years ago. In *Trafficked*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo blends facts and fiction. The style of her writing enhances the full appreciation of the work. There are instances in the novel where real facts, identifiable people and places in and outside Nigeria are used in the novel.

It is a universally acknowledged fact that in the present Nigerian society, despite the clarion call to end human trafficking, people still indulge in such cruel business. The victims are kidnapped, coerced, sold and forced into bonded labour by slavers for purposes of sexual or commercial exploitation. This affront on human dignity and life is a human rights violation that needs to be fought, but unfortunately, its widespread and complex operation make prosecution and punishment of traffickers nearly impossible in many cases.

From the novel under study, we discover that one of the most common reasons for trafficking in women is to fuel the prostitution trade and make all the monetary gains. The traffickers often recruit or buy women from destitute areas, promising to smuggle them to a new country in order to find them a greener pasture. But in all scenarios, the truth is that the women are often raped, and abused by their recruiters, and then sent to brothels or underground prostitution rings where they are sometimes literally held under lock and key. Many are told that they will have to work in the sex industry until the debt for their transport and other exigencies has been paid off, which may effectively be for the rest of their lives. Human trafficking is contrary to the principles of human freedom and dignity. The exploitation of the victim dehumanizes the individuals who are trafficked, rewards the inhumanity of the traffickers and weakens the moral and social fabric of our society at large.

Statement of the Problem

Although some literary critics have analyzed Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* to demonstrate a representation of Nigerian female characters resisting the liminal spaces of sex trafficking they are forced into, this present study examines how the writer projects the image of the dehumanized woman and how the ingrained social injustice in Nigerian society is created and sustained. It argues that this inhuman social practice is a fundamental violence against humanity and retards human and economic growth especially in Africa; it finally reinstates the urgent need to institutionalize and enforce stiff penalties against traffickers which can serve as a deterrent and pave a viable way to eradicating this monstrous evil.

Theoretical Framework

For this analysis, we locate our discourse within the framework of feminist and postcolonial theories. Feminist theory generally studies women's experiences and their subordination by men. It is a way of looking at the social world through the lens of gender inequality. Feminist theory addresses the roles women have in society and the ongoing battles women face. Most importantly, this way of thinking about the social world focuses on the rights of women including: economic, sexual, reproductive, property and voting rights. Postcolonial theory on the other hand, examines among others the anti-conquest narrative and functional relations of social, cultural and political powers that sustain the tripartite governmental bodies of colonialism, post colonialism and neocolonialism.

These theories are applied to help us understand the experiences of the migrants, that is, the trafficked victims in diaspora as depicted in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, the ill treatment meted out on them. They are equally employed to expose the brazen corrupting influences of the postcolonialists and how they actively employed the 'us' and 'them' binary which among others are reflected on the realities of human trafficking prevalent in contemporary Nigeria.

Analysis

Trafficked is the story of Nneoma, Efe, Fola, Alice, etc, who are lured into prostitution with fake promises of better life and jobs overseas. These girls only discover at their destination point that they have been trafficked for sexual exploitation and for the total monetary gains for their abusers and owners. The victims are naïve poor girls whose mindsets are to secure gainful

employment to help themselves and alleviate the poor state of their families not knowing that humiliation and cruel exploitation awaits them abroad. The traffickers tricks work through the use of adverts, pictures of school which the would-be victims were made to believe that they would work in and also by issuing fake employment letters to them. Nneoma narrates the story of her travel to abroad to Efe, "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 secured a teaching appointment in the United Kingdom and she would introduce me to them and I could come with her" (126). Nneoma innocently takes the bait because of her willfulness to access freedom, live a better life and alleviate her family's poverty.

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 sponsor. 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).

Adimora-Ezeigbo paints a vivid picture of how joblessness, insecurity, mass unemployment, social injustice, corruption, loss of societal values and uncertain/harsh economic situation in Nigeria fuel prostitution and the international sex trade. Efe corroborates this by revealing her family's poor economic background to Nneoma, "I was out of 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).

Human traffickers target people whose safety net has eroded and whose options for self-sufficiency are few. While the sex merchants are indicted, the society that is negligent of the plots of certain villains is implicated. These miscreants intentionally extend the frontiers of slavery by exploiting the ignorance of the people as well as the indiscretion of the government. In a country like Nigeria where desperation leads people to migrate, it is easy for human traffickers and recruiters to market a dream, or a lie to vulnerable individuals particularly women.

Uwakwe rightly explains:

The compelling matrix of inordinate incidents for which the likes of Nneoma yield to their traffickers indicate the status of the members of different labour groups in Nigeria whose 'take home pay' can hardly take them home. Most fittingly, the portrayal of the characters gullibility becomes the measure of aggregate naiveté within a society in which the government proves irresponsible to the masses' plight. These conflicts trail Nneoma's innocence and her quest to survive and be rehabilitated after she had inadvertently procured the stigma the *Trafficked* (130).

Sex slaves are often recruited from different regions of the world at different periods of time and this is most times based on a region's socio-economic and political situation. The trafficked are forced to perform work or services under threat and violence, coercion, and other methods of intimidation. By forcing them into prolonged mental, emotional and physical deprivation and abuse, traffickers rob victims of their free will and human dignity. One of the trafficked girls, Efe, recounts her ugly story to Nneoma:

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 up money to return home Then the police arrested me and I was deported (100).

These ladies are commodified and merchandised. Several acts of indignities, humiliations and cruel degradations are meted out on them. It is very obvious from the touching experiences Efe narrates to Nneoma that many of these Nigerian ladies involved in international sex trade do not go into it out of their own volition. They are pushed into the trade by prevalent socio-economic pressures in Nigeria. 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 their country Nigeria. For instance, while in London, Nneoma resists (although with less success) men's persistent attempts to lure her to bed (157). She prefers, "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).

To make matters worse, these trafficked girls have no valid documents because traffickers seize their passports and papers in order to perpetually have a firm hold and control over them. Upon arrival, traffickers and pimps often tell the women that they must work off a huge debt, which they had not heard about before leaving home. Nneoma recalls her ordeal in the hands of Madam Dollar:

So I walk the streets of Rome for Madam Dollar for three years and she still 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).

On another occasion, Madam Dollar threatens her victim, "The less money you bring me, the longer you will have to stay with me, you know ... You must pay me back every kobo I used to buy you" (129-130). The psychological control traffickers have over their victim through threats against their lives and victim's families ensures obedience and submission. Jorgen Carling points out that while, "violent assault is undoubtedly common (it is) neither a rule nor a necessity in the Nigerian model of trafficking. The psychological control traffickers have over the women often makes violence unnecessary" (48). We equally observed that all the promises made to those girls are fake and are however, cancelled as the reality of their true condition is made known to them. Nneoma recounts:

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 ... she keeps us prisoner in her flat. Life is hell in Rome – we are always walking the night, selling sex to Italian men and foreigners (128-129).

Hence Carling notes that while "trafficking networks have been able to offer young woman the opportunity to travel (abroad)... these offers involve varying degrees of fraud" (55) that "incarcerate the life of a recruited victim" (Nadaswaran np).

Traffickers go further to use 'spiritual' means in concretizing their victims' enslavement. Efe and Nneoma do not only have similar stories but the same terms of agreement and consequences of their breach. The locales of the shrines and altars where these girls take binding oath are revealed here.

.... Efe stopped her with a question. "Where was the oath taken? In a shrine?"

"No, they used the Bible and an image of an *arusi*"

"In my case, they took us to a shrine somewhere between Lagos and Ibadan" (128).

These are some of the extreme measures with which the abominable acts of enslavement are 'spiritualized'. The traffickers resort to oaths at different altars and in compelling conditions, driving the ignorant victims to abide by strange deeds and agreements. Uwakwe observes that, "In matching the Bible and *arusi*, the writer intensifies the view of religion in conflicting disposition" (146) and this equally points to the fact that the abductors believe that both the Bible and *arusi* are compelling forces that can instill fear in the victims.

Indictment of Nigerian Government Structures

In many instances, Adimora-Ezeigbo indicts the structures of government in Nigeria and this provokes the reader's appraisal of the state of affairs in the country where the transition to postcolonial era seems to increase and extend the conflicts that had earlier been generated. The author employs symbolism in creating a rhetorical force:

Ofomata looked up from time to time to watch the heavy traffic on the mainland Bridge, which had been constructed by one of the military governments that ruled the country between 1966 and 1999 – except for the four intervening years between 1979 and 1983, when President Shehu Shagari became the first democratically elected president. But the soldiers had overthrown him and taken over again as if to rule was their birth right. Civilians were back in power now but little had changed really.... Corruption was still rife, injustice stamped about like a monster and poverty ravaged the population (35).

The writer uses the 'bridge' picture to highlight our leaders' insatiable appetite for power and the hint to the ruler's birthright equally serves as a metaphor used to explain the increasing conflict, corruption, misgovernance, from one dispensation of government to another. The narrator's allusion to the years, "1966 and 1999" drives home of the ingrained misrule in the country which is prevalent even up till date. Also the bridge quickly paints a picture of the action of government from the old days of slavery to the

colonial period when warrant chiefs were imposed and used by the colonizers to create confusion and wreak havoc in the country.

Furthermore, the Edo State Governor is made to represent the government's negligence on the trafficking issue. The writer's portrayal of trafficking as a gruesome postcolonial insignia also stands as certain tribute to history. The apathetic stance of the government is glaringly clear and permeates every single dispensation of government. Evidently, the government's insensitivity to the plight of citizens is seen in students' protest on campus. Even non-students support the demonstration as they affirm. "... I think the students were justified in protesting. Why are we surprised that so many young people want to leave this country? Is it a wonder that all these girls end up getting trafficked?" (178-179).

Instances and evidence of ineptitude and irresponsible leadership resonate in the novel. The non-payment of gratuity to civil servants who had long been retired proves to be one of those irresponsible and insensitive attitude for which many dispensations of the Nigerian government are indicted. Ogukwe, Nneoma's father is made to believe that retirees are summoned for the payment of their gratuity which government has failed to pay after so many years of retirement. Ogukwe braved the situation not minding his aching arthritis and age. He travels all the way to Enugu to get his pay (gratuity), but that turns out to be a fruitless long journey as the government do not have any plan to make such payments not to talk of inviting them. Ogukwe gets drowned in the summit of his great expectations. The conversation in the Ogukue's family reveals their apprehension thus: "I don't trust our government. Look at the teachers' strike nothing has been done about it. But it is the federal government and not the state government" (Adimora-Ezeigbo 110). Emphasis is, however, laid on the parallelism on the grip of delusion that precedes such wasted long journeys, a visible parallel to the illusion of the trafficked girls.

Summary and Conclusion

Human trafficking causes untold miseries as it violates the rights and dignity of the individual in several ways. It violates the individual's rights to life, dignity, security, privacy, health, education and redress of grievances. And the global scale of this heinous crime and its intricate transnational network facilitates the boom.

Unfortunately, from the text under study, specified figures on Nigerian women forced into sex trafficking are unobtainable given the

complex organizational structure, migration routes and transit stays used to traffic victims. On the other hand, however, research shows that approximately “40,000 to 50,000 Nigeria women have become victims of trafficking (sexual exploitation, forced labour, the removal of organs, or servitude) over the past 15 years (1990-2005)” (Carling 45).

From this research, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo has used her fiction – *Trafficked* to explain that sex trafficking is an endemic global problem with sheer immensity. She drives home the point that the intricate transnational network of this organized global crime facilitates the smuggling, coercion, intimidating and violence against women and children. The writer equally indicts the Nigerian government for being irresponsible and negligent over the plight of the general masses. This research reinstates that it is the duty of government to stand up against traffickers who treat other human beings as objects to be bought and sold, and to advocate on behalf of those who have little power to defend their human rights. It finally concludes that in order to combat and eradicate this social injustice, state legislation with stiff penalties that criminalizes this nefarious and barbaric act must be institutionalized.

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