

THE FEMALE BEING, MIGRATION AND NEO-SLAVERY: A TALE OF TRIAL AND TRIUMPH IN AKACHI ADIMORA – EZEIGBO'S *TRAFFICKED*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the various negative stereotypical perceptions about trafficked female beings and their determination to survive against all odds. It makes a critical textual analysis of the protagonist and two other female characters in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked, showing the trials and triumphs of the female being and the 'choice to challenge' in line with the 2021 International Women's Day theme "Choose to Challenge", despite all limitations and backlashes, thereby showing the strength of a typical African woman who is filled with vigour, determination and aspirations. This paper also examines whether the novelist is judgmental, moralistic about women trafficking or if the women in the novel are victims of society and unwilling partners in the sex trade. Thus, a humanist approach will be employed.

Keywords: African, Female Being, Migration, Neo-Slavery, Choose to Challenge, Trafficking.

Introduction

The female being has overtime been regarded as weak, thus contextualized as a 'being' which must be seen but not heard especially in Africa. This has made some of them become victims of sexual exploitation, trafficking, neo-slavery and other inhuman treatments. According to Bela Hovy, Frank Laczko and Rene N'Guethia Kouassi, in Africa, an estimated 47 per cent of all international migrants are female, which is very similar to the global share of female migrants (48%). Within the continent, the share of female migrants is the highest in Eastern Africa (50%), followed by Middle Africa and Western Africa (47% each), Southern Africa (44%), and Northern Africa (43%)...(African Migration, 18); thus, the feminization of migration and contemporary slavery in Africa. Women leave their country of origin in search of

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greener pastures and often suffer from human and labour rights violations due to few or no legal protection. Many women, especially the younger and inexperienced are lured by their older male friends, 'big chics' or socialites with a promise of a better life. Bosede F. Afolayan suggests that:

the only way these younger inexperienced ones could get into the trade is if they are deceived, cajoled or threatened to do so. The younger women are right choices for the older women especially when they live in poverty. Through deception, the older women talk the parents of younger ones into releasing them. The parents are usually happy to do this because it is one less mouth to feed. The younger women are already into the trade before they realize they have been fooled. The prospect of running away is usually unattractive because they know poverty that awaits them at home. (*Global*, 185).

New data is emerging from surveys that provide insights into the migration intentions of people living in Africa. At first sight, data from recent nationally representative surveys conducted by Gallup and Afrobarometer give the impression that high numbers of people wish to migrate from Africa... especially the young and educated (African Migration, 20). Generally speaking, migrants tend to move to cities or countries where they expect to find better opportunities resulting from the concentration of economic activities or safer environments than their current location. Corrado Fumagalli and Katja Schaefer assert that "... number of women moving to urban areas in search of better opportunities and also as a response to discrimination and sex abuse and violence in their family relations" (*African Migration*, 44), is on the rise. Thus, female victims continue to be the primary targets for trafficking in persons – neo-slavery. According to the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons "female victims continue to be the primary targets for trafficking in persons. For every ten victims detected globally in 2018, about five were adults and two were young girls".

The Female Being Defined

Should the female being's vulnerability be taken for granted? Do they go through the subjugation, dehumanization and contextualization because they really wanted to? Who is a female being? What does it mean to be a woman? It might really be impossible to define female being or womanhood considering the various roles they play in the society – wife, lover, mother, and companion. From being the more vulnerable and weaker of the two genders in the human

race to being the stronger; thus the female being means different things to different people and the society. Overall, the female being is filled with strength, zest and determination to fulfill her dreams for not just self and family emancipation against all odds, but also societal emancipation as would be seen in the characters of Nneoma, Efe and Hannah in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*.

According to Global Volunteers in an online post, "women are the primary caretakers of children and elders in every country of the world. International studies demonstrate that when the economy and political organization of a society change, women take the lead in helping the family adjust to the new realities and challenges. They are likely to be the prime initiators of outside assistance, and play an important role in facilitating changes in family life..." (The Global). Furthermore, in an interview compiled and edited by Tegwyn Hughes and Ally Mastantuono on the 2021 International Women's Day at the Queen's University, the female being is defined as:

being able to be powerful and assertive, yet kind at the same time. It means being compassionate and vulnerable towards those we love in our lives without feeling weak for doing so. It means striving for our goals even on the face of adversity we may encounter along the way. (Anna Logan, ArtSci'20)

From the above, we can assert that the female being is not just a metaphor to life but also oxymoronic in nature. She is powerful, yet gentle, assertive yet kind, compassionate yet fierce, weak yet determined. In further investigations by Hughes and Mastantuono a female being also entails:

being opinionated, articulate, and strong-willed. It means working to destroy the disgusting double standards that can be forced upon them ... it means refusing to accept the words "prude", "slut", or "bitch". It means supporting fellow women, when society ceaselessly pits them against each other. (Julia Harmsworth, ArtSci'23)

From the aforementioned we can also see that the female being has rediscovered herself and voice, and ready to right the wrongs which the society has made them to be; therefore, rejecting being stereotyped while trying to be submissive and complimentary in a male dominated society like Africa against all odds. It is probably for these reasons that the theme for the 2021 International Women's Day is titled "Choose to Challenge".

The Trafficked Female Beings in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

Afolayan notes that:

women trafficking refers to the movement of women from place to place across and within the country or outside the country usually illegally for the purpose of sexual and monetary gain on the part of the handlers who are either the pimps or madams. Many young girls have been lured by the prospect of attractive jobs abroad only to realize too late that they have been trafficked. On arrival, their passports are confiscated, and they become illegal immigrants whose reality or existence does not count as they cannot be traced or identified... (Global,186)

The above is the plight of Ezeigbo's protagonist in *Trafficked*, Nneoma and her friend, Efe, who against all odds choose to challenge the society which ordinarily has stereotyped and written them off. Nneoma is our definition of the female being that is opinionated, articulate and strong-willed who choose to challenge. She is a female being who refused to accept the words "prude, slut or bitch despite the travails of life. Afolayan notes that "*Trafficked* creates a realistic story of how Nneoma, and by implication, Nigerian girls are lured into prostitution slavery by cartels through deception and the promise of a brighter life. However, it is not all a sad story of physical, psychological and sexual abuse because the protagonist rises above her sordid past and tries to give her life meaning at the end of the novel" (Global, 189). Ezeigbo treats the issue of international prostitution, by extension, migration and neo-slavery, and reveals the reasons for its rise. She paints a strong mental picture of how it can be overcome in the character of Nneoma.

Nneoma's tale, which is central to the novel is that of a rise from nobody to somebody, zero to hero; grass to grace. Born into Ojukwe Eke's family as the third child – a typical regular Nigerian family that lives from hand to mouth, she grows up with her siblings hopeful and full of life with the traits of an amazon who is not afraid to speak up despite her tender age. As a child, she is filled with vigour and intelligence; her father sees in her the qualities of a superwoman and nicknamed her "my little mother". Thus, from childhood she is seen as a star in whose shoulder the family fortune could change for the better. But life takes a different turn for her and her family:

apart from her childhood, which had been spent in relative innocence and blissful ignorance about the dawn of life, she had watched her family's fortunes dwindle all through her teenage years. Misfortune had

dogged them with horrendous consistency. Her most recent experience had shown that there was nothing to hope for ... (*Trafficked*, 5).

Growing up, fortune dwindles; hope seems lost with each passing day and the once happy and adventurous child who would stop at nothing to make her environment feel her presence becomes unhappy with the state of poverty that ravages her family. She loves her family, especially her father whom she sees as a good man. From a relatively tender age she would tell whosoever cares to listen "I like my father ... he is a good man" (*Trafficked*, 8). She is also loved and cherished in a peaceful and lovely homestead. So, seeing a once happy home gradually turn to a sad one due to poverty and betrayal from her uncle was the tonic she needed in her quest to change the dwindling fortune of her family. She chooses to take the bull by the horn, displaying the act of bravado and care which are characteristics of a female being – an amazon.

In most cases, women would opt to migrate to another country not for their personal interests, but to ease the burden of the family by choosing to take the risk which some men would not do in order to put their families on the map. It is important to understand the intent for this "life changing opportunity" as it is always envisaged. Even families choose to send a female family member abroad due to the idealized conception on women as more likely to sacrifice their own wellbeing for that their family. Some women migrate to escape domestic violence, un-happy marriages, poverty or pressure to marry. In Nneoma's case just like Efe her friend and many other female beings out there, it was a matter of putting the family's wellbeing above theirs even without their families' awareness or approval to travel. The intent was that of pure love and sacrifices for the trafficked, but traffickers do not tell them the truth about the nature of their journey and the circumstances that always surround their future jobs. They were often deceived and lured to a life they would have no choice of living. Nneoma explained "I went to Italy with a woman who promised to help me and some other girls to get jobs. She said it was easy to get good jobs there and that we could migrate to Britain after a while if we wanted" (*Trafficked*, 15). Considering the socio-economic turmoil in Africa, it is difficult for anyone with ambition not to pick up the offer which seems to come on a platter of gold – a lifetime opportunity as they were often made to believe. And not even being betrothed to Ofomata could change her quest to this lifetime opportunity. That is the nature of the female being; strong-willed.

Like Nneoma, Efe affirms how she was fraudulently deceived into thinking that she was taking a step in the right direction and eventually forced to swear:

One day I saw an advertisement on 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 ... I responded to the advertisement without my cousin's knowledge ... some were rejected, but I was selected. None of the men interviewed was taken ... (*Trafficked*, 98 – 99)

Nneoma and Efe were barely 19 when they migrate to Europe for a “life changing opportunity” As naïve, adventurous, vulnerable and inexperienced as they were; it was easy for them to fall into an unexpected trap. Should they be entirely blamed for that? Traffickers took advantage of their vulnerability and inexperience to cash out in Europe. Nneoma and Efe have agreed to travel to Europe on different arrangements but same mission; to get decent and lucrative jobs only for them to become prostitutes. Under the care of Madam Gold and Madam Dollar respectively, they work by selling their bodies to different men. They are beaten and starved if they refuse to play along. Like slaves, they have no freedom and whatsoever money they get, go into the accounts of the older women. It is usually easier for the traffickers to take advantage of young and inexperienced persons in a society as ours which is still developing and ravaged by poverty. More so, they have integrated technology into their crime at every level of the process, from recruiting to exploring victims. Many vulnerable young people, especially females are approached on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, etc., and they are easy target in their search for acceptance, attention, friendship or marriage. According to Hansford Brian, Chief, UNODC Advocacy “Traffickers see their victims as commodities without regard for human dignity and rights. They sell fellow human beings for a price that can range from tens of US dollars to tens of thousands, with large criminal organizations making the highest incomes”(2).

While in Europe, they are subjected to all forms of dehumanization and brutalization, including selling their bodies to pay off an “assumed” debt. And above all, they are sold off at will and taken to locations where they are more or less not conversant with as Nneoma would testify.

... I don't even know the name of the street as I was never allowed to go out except on the few occasions when Baron took me with him or allowed another man to take me out and bring me back after wards. (*Trafficked*, 16)

The above explains neo-slavery, otherwise known as contemporary slavery or modern slavery a situation that continues to occur in present day society. Slavery as a social institution, system, a concept and practice manifest themselves in different ways. Right from the feudalistic origins of most states to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the American slavery, the term has come to mean servitude, the control of a group over another, a master-servant relationship and the use of force and discrimination. Slaves are seen as lower and inferior to their masters. They have no dignity and are treated as objects to be used and disposed of at will. Being a slave means living in bondage, physical and psychological suffering, trauma, humiliation and vulnerability. Neo-slavery does not only occur in the West or Europe, it also occurs across the globe including Africa. It is in our homes, political, educational and religious systems. In Ezeigbo's *Ihite-Agu*, Prophet Elias uses his religious antics to enslave his followers, make them see him as God and threaten them with hell fire, thus, they become psychologically and emotionally enslaved by him. He abuses them physically and psychologically as Hannah, Nneoma's elder sister narrates her ordeal with the opportunist and charlatan called Prophet Elias. Those he coveted, he sexually exploited and beat them at will:

After three years of wild adventure, Hannah returned home damaged and disconsolate. Kept as a concubine in a harem often women, she was the only one to remain childless. She had to look after the children of Prophet Elias's wife and eight other concubines and was used as a punch bag when the prophet needed to unburden his pent-up emotions. Hannah passed over the river of misery and trudged on the road that led to death's land. (*Trafficked*, 171)

Prophet Elias, Baron, Madam Gold and Madam Dollars subjected their victims to untold hardships and made life miserable for them. Hannah, Nneoma and Efe are subjugated, dehumanized and kept as beasts of burden by their slave masters mentioned above. Nneoma, Efe, and the other deportees in Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, like most immigrant women are frequently isolated to private households without papers or legal protection. They work long-hours for low wages (most times with no wages at all) and their work can be particularly degrading. Many of them are victims of psychological, physical and sexual abuse. So, Nneoma, Efe and other trafficked women in Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* were violated in all ramifications, as Efe narrates "Madam Gold sold me to a pimp – a white man – after four years of slavery for her. I worked for my new owner for two years before I escaped ..." (*Trafficked*, 100).

Nneoma affirms Efe's experience on how undocumented trafficked migrant women are treated:

In Italy I discovered that I am trafficked. I have no say on the matter. There's a woman called Madam Dollar-nothing comes between her and money. She owns us and the man, whom we learn to call Captain, is her bodyguard. She keeps us as prisoners in her flat. Life is hell in Rome – we are always walking the night, selling sex to Italian men and foreigners ... As soon we arrive, she sells my friend ... (*Trafficked*, 128-9).

Even in London, she was continuously raped and dehumanized by the sadist Baron, who would also not let her go to brothels with other girls but would bring men to the flat; men who sometimes asked for oral and anal sex which she never obliged to (*Trafficked*, 132). Afolayan notes that "the aspect of Nneoma's degradation is captured in reminiscences. It is not narrated as direct experience but related in recollection to her friends. The musings represent the act of memory. It is as if Nneoma is writing her autobiography... Her journey into prostitution is a sad and pitiable one" (Global, 191).

In their quest for a better life for their families – ease the burden and wipe away poverty in their homes – Nneoma and Efe are literally subjected to neo-slavery. A situation that becomes unbearable that they seek for a way to escape. An escape to freedom and the better life they crave for. Efe laments thus "... I fled to Verona ... and worked independently for about another year, because I wanted to save money to return home (*Trafficked*, 100). Nneoma has similar thing to say:

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 not look back until I have disappeared round the corner of the next street. I run and run until I'm out of breath. (*Trafficked*, 134)

If it were the life they wanted to live they would not have risked their lives to escape from their captives knowing the consequences when caught. Their tales are that of women broken. For them, prostitution is a moral and social vice, and to be trafficked through the promise of greener pastures is worse. The female being is strong and determined always wanting to make a change; always wanting opportunity to achieve better and greater things if given the chance. The female being is resilient; resilience being defined as the capacity to recover

quickly and fully from a shock. For female beings as Nneoma, Efe and Hannah who experienced low autonomy, domestic violence, low income, sexual abuse and exploitation – neo-slavery – recovering quickly would take much time and effort but they did not succumb. A Spanish proverb says “to tell a woman everything she cannot do is to tell her what she can do.” The proverb invariably explains women’s resilience in their quest to achieving greater heights. Nneoma, Efe and Hannah choose to beat the odds; they choose to challenge their past, stereotypes and contextualization of the female being – especially the trafficked - to live a better life.

Returning home is an escape route, a route to make lemonades despite the lemon life gives to them in Europe. Though deported, they are ready to face it all; they choose to challenge. Despite the increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression which are associated with deported trafficked women, they choose to be strong. On arrival, they know that it is not going to be easy; filled with fear and shame about what the society could make of them. Ezeigbo recalls the deportees’ anxieties upon arrival:

struck by the silence that overwhelmed the coach as the distance to the airport building diminished, she glanced at the other girls and saw a mixture of fear, anger, sadness and disappointment on their faces. She was sure her own face was equally marked by these emotions. She had left with much hope and aspiration, now she was returning in shame and hopelessness. (*Trafficked*, 12)

The above explains the emotional and psychological trauma female trafficked deportees go through, which is enough to put them into depression. Aside that, the society usually writes them off, which is also in itself damaging. Afolayan notes that “Nneoma’s experience reveals the moralistic stance the society assumes in the case of trafficking. It is easy to condemn the trafficked girls, but the society has not cared to know what led the girls into the act...” (Global,190). This could be seen in the conversation between two women when Nneoma and her colleagues arrived the airport. “Ah, here are the returnee prostitutes from Italy,” she heard a woman dressed in a red brocade caftan call out to her companion ... “shameless girls,” the second woman replied ...” (*Trafficked*, 22). “Shame on you,” one of the officers taunted. Go and join the rest of the scum who flew in from Rome few minutes before you.” “Look at them,” another put in. “what a disgrace to the country!” (*Trafficked*, 17). These and many more are the thoughts and feelings of people back home. The society tags and boos the deportees with all sorts of despicable names and gestures because of the

'disgraceful' homecoming. Even the endless questions of reporters who lay ambush with their cameras and television crew (*Trafficked*, 18) are part of the challenges Nneoma and other girls suffering same fate must rise above. Sometimes, the press would stop at nothing to bring them down just to thrive in their own callings. This is evident as a reporter resurfaces in her life that led to her sack from Chief Amadi when she has already moved on trying to make a decent living (*Trafficked*, 266-72).

Despite the psychological, emotional, physical and societal challenges, the female being is poised to make a change and rule her world. One of the steps to achieving her dreams is self-realization; an ability to be comfortable in her own skin and society. Upon arrival, Nneoma and Efe realize and accept their own environment, and that is the catalyst they need for the change that would later come: "...as bad as things are here, home is home, remarked the girl sitting next to her. Nneoma turned to look at her "Yes, it feels good to be back, doesn't it?" "Well, I don't know about that, but I'm glad I am alive." "Me, too life is precious ..." (*Trafficked*, 24).

One could call it re-orientation or self-actualization. To appreciate the fact that they are alive, and given a second chance as not many are lucky to have such opportunity. Being alive and accepting one's originality is very important for self-development. The female being looks forward to contributing to her society meaningfully and better her lots to show care, love and strength. They always want to be impactful:

Hannah was looking for a way to contribute to the household. Though she has trained as a stenographer at a second-rate college in Onitsha, it seemed unlikely she would find a job ... Hannah decided to trade in okirika - second hand clothes – which she bought from Aba and sold in Ihitte-Agu Market ... (*Trafficked*, 207)

Like the protagonist in *Trafficked*, Hannah chooses to challenge and live above her past despite what the society could have thought of her. One of the strengths of the female being is her ability to adaptability. And this Nneoma, Efe and Hannah exhibit in Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*. Nneoma adapts to her new environment despite being dehumanized, to reach her desired goal. Apart from being kept at the Oasis for rehabilitation and re-orientation, she and her friend embraced their new environment to give themselves personal a sense of belonging; they learn skills to prepare them for gainful employment and from venturing again into prostitution. Unlike Nneoma and Efe, Alice is not ready to learn. Her case is that of someone who fail to rise above her sordid past.

According to Emily Thompson, "there are certain strengths that make the female being amazing, and they include emotional intelligence, ability to take risk, humility, perseverance, ability to multitask, communication etc". Alice fails to be emotionally intelligent; she continues to frolic with men against the rules at the Oasis while Nneoma exhibits all of the aforementioned to a reasonable extent. She must let go of the past and embrace a better future. Afolayan posits that "Nneoma cuts the figure of a weak-but-powerful woman. She is weak because she cannot defend herself against the powers that kept her, but her determination to make the best of a bad situation and escape from tyranny is commendable" (*Global*, 191).

Afolayan further notes that "Nneoma has been transported to Europe for sex trade, but her recollection adds another dimension to her story. It is not just physical, but an inward journey. It gives her the sense of growth out of slavery and searching for herself, her identity..." (*Global*, 191). That exhibits the strength and nature of the female being. While trying to acquire skills, she also realizes that she could go back to school to get a university degree in Business Education to support whatsoever income that may come from dress making; above all, she wants to achieve her life-long dream, thereby exhibiting the female being's ability to multitask.

Though Nneoma does not go to reunite with her family almost the same time with Efe, she is mindful of their existence as well as sends financial assistance which turns out a source of income for the family that empowers Hannah. And when she does reunite with her family, it is indeed one of the happiest moments in Ogwukwe Eke's household. Nneoma, like an amazon regains her confidence and finds a new life. She faces her challenges emotionally, physically and community wise – and she conquer. She does not allow herself to be haunted by the past. She moves on for a greater glory. She exhibits the strength of a female being – emotional intelligence, humility, adaptability, communication, perseverance, relationship building, just to mention but a few. She dreams about nothing else except the day she would get into the university to study her dream course. Every moment, she daydreamed and fantasized about it. Everything else paled into insignificance (*Trafficked*, 304).

She would later achieve all that she sets her eyes on – an entrepreneur, undergraduate and reconciling with her betrothed. Indeed, there is no limit to what women can do.

Conclusion

Through the character of Nneoma, the protagonist of Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, her friend Efe and her elder sister, Hannah, we see the trials, resilience and triumph of the female being. We see women that were trafficked, trampled, subjugated, violated, exposed to danger, dehumanized and subjected to neo-slavery yet they set out on a journey to self-discovery, actualization and re-orientation; they challenged their fears and won the battles. *Trafficked* explores the exploitation of women using Nneoma as its protagonist. In it, Ezeigbo narrates the tales of Nneoma and other girls who are exposed to same kind trauma and servitude. Thus, Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* is the tale of triumph from the sordid side of life.

The female being is adventurous – not afraid to take risk. The female being is weak, yet strong and emotionally intelligent. They should be encouraged and emancipated not humiliated and contextualized. So, women, especially those from developing countries could grab these opportunities to make better impacts in society.

In 1948, the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares that:

- All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights
- No one shall be held in slavery or servitude
- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Hence, neo-slavery as well as trafficking in persons should be frowned upon in its strongest terms. According to UNODC, human trafficking is not only a crime; it is also a gross violation of human rights. Traffickers treat trafficked persons like a commodity, trampling on their basic rights to make their own decisions, to move freely and to work where and for whom they choose. A human rights approach when addressing human trafficking is crucial to restore the dignity and wellbeing of the trafficked persons especially women. Thus, it is necessary to protect the rights of migrant women including their rights to have a family, to physical integrity, to decent working conditions, to physical integrity, to fair wages, to education, to healthcare, to equal access to justice.

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