

NEO-SLAVERY AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: FEMALE VICTIMS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN FICTION

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Abstract

*Fictional production of the twenty first century has opened a vista upon which can be reflected the issues of neo-slavery, sexual exploitation and female victimization in Nigerian historical process. New forms of slavery have become visible in the world today. This is in spite of the fact that slavery has been legally abolished all over the world. Regrettably, illegal slavery or compelled labor without proper remuneration permeates the modern world especially as sexual exploitation. The Nigerian society is not left out of this evil malaise in which women and children are usually vulnerable and easy preys. Nigerian literary sphere has captured incidences of sexual intimidation and manipulation represented in Nigerian fictional texts. Researches abound of sexual exploitation and rape, child labor, human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, violence and slavery in wider literary discussions. This work examines occurrences of slavery and exploitation of women represented in selected Nigerian literary outputs. The study is based on the framework of Karl Marx's theory of Exploitation that explains the unfair treatment of a class by others. It x-ray issues of female mistreatment by the powerful and the rich in selected Nigerian literary texts: *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Violence* by Festus Iyayi and *Woes of Ikenga* by Ndubuisi George. Specifically, the paper highlights cases of sexual abuse in the selected texts. This study calls for the provision of better welfare for the people and the enabling laws to provide deterrents against human trafficking to ensure the protection of vulnerable Nigerian female gender in the 21st century.*

Keywords: Neo-Slavery, Sexual Exploitation, Human Trafficking, Victimization, Rape.

Introduction

Among the ills prevalent in the 21st century is slavery and sexual exploitation. Though slavery has been outlawed in most parts of the world, aspects of this

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dehumanizing enterprise rear up its head in different new ways. These include trafficking in persons, child labour, prostitution, house-help molestation, sexual exploitation, among other forms of dehumanizing acts. These are all business ventures as they involve deals between two unequal parties. Nadaswaran writes that "human sex trafficking has become a global plague of great magnitude, robbing women of their sense of worth and dignity as human persons". Women and children are the easy prey and victims of sex trafficking and abuse. Acknowledging the global spread of this ill, Ngwe and Elechi observe that "human trafficking is one of the fast growing and serious forms of transnational crimes in the world today. It is estimated that between 500,000 and 4,000,000 people, mostly women and children are trafficked across internal borders annually". In his submission, Rynhart infers that: "Slavery is sadly very much a modern 21st century problem. It is also often right in front of your eyes. The practice is pervasive and the numbers are huge" ...Slavery and forced labour are to be found in construction sites, mines, in people's homes targeting domestic workers, agriculture and fishing and the sex industry. Men are found more in agriculture and industry sectors while women tend to end up in the sex industries and as domestic workers.

The act of slavery is domiciled in the economic sphere where there are owners and the owned in a relationship of master and servant. The common denominator is of exploitation, described as "an economic structure-feudal, capitalist, or socialist, in any set of power relations between agents that determine, the control and distribution of the social surplus" (Vrousalis). On the other hand, Warren in *Encyclopedia of Global Justice* describes exploitation as "to take advantage of". The act of exploitation involves taking advantage of one by another for the one's benefit. Karl Marx in his theory of Capitalism highlights the idea of exploitation, "as a power relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Such imbalanced relationship is described as "taking advantage of B. Hence sexual exploitation is one of the exploitative contents being taken advantage of by the exploiters.

Literary contents record issues whereby women and children and indeed most young and male adults are exploited. Researchers have studied the selected texts critically as literary works. For example, Olaniyi and Akinwale in "Rethinking Feminist Episteme in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*: An Agenda for Social Re-Engineering", highlights the use of sex for pleasure and emotional purgation. It reads "having embraced sex as an instrument to tell the story of Nigerian civil war, Adichie's female characters are depicted as either sex maniac or sex starved. To achieve emotional purgation, Olanna lures Richard to have

sex with her. In the same vein, Chinyere regularly visits Ugwu's room to have a "quickie" behind closed door. Most of her female characters do the unusual by luring, cajoling or thrusting themselves at men in a manner unheard of in African society" (148). These writers succinctly condemn feminist theory as useful in advancing development for the Nigerian society. They counter the erroneous belief that "alien standard can provide the requisite critical template to investigate African society" (151). They argue that this feminist ideology does not project the African society and value in a good light because "in traditional African society, sex is never contemplated except after marriage which is traditionally contracted between families. Ironically, none of Odenigbo, Olanna, Amala, Kainene, Richard, Ugwu and Chinyere is married" (149). The paper dismisses feminism as a viable tool for development, calling for "a renunciation of Western theoretical standpoint including feminist ideology, to be replaced with an African-centered alternative in line with Afrocentric philosophical tradition" (151). Emenike and Asuzu examine sexual exploitation of women in Nigeria war novels using Immanuel Kant theory of sexual objectification, an aspect of feminist theory, seek to explain sexuality in human relationships in the essay, "Sexual Exploitation and the Nigerian Civil War: A Study of Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*". The paper avers that "deprivation and loss are usual accompaniments to war and women seem to suffer more than men as they are sexually exploited, abused and raped" (141). This assertion is replete in literary texts as women and children usually are found to be the victims of sexual exploitation.

A review of other authors and critical works such as "A Post Colonial Ecofeminist Comparative Analysis of War Fiction: The Case of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*" among others. Ademola in "A Linguistic (Stylistic) Reading of Ideological Discourse in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*, the *Contract* and *Heroes*", undertakes a reading of the ideological discourse in Festus Iyayi's texts through the prism of linguistic analysis. The paper seeks to establish the nexus between Literature and Ideology through language as means of societal transformation. Using Marxist literary theory based on socialist and dialectical theories, the paper observes that "his novels *Violence*, *The Contract* and *Heroes* have demonstrated ... total commitment to the radical transformation of the society caught in the unholy rapacious embrace of the new-imperialist and colonial social order" (130). The paper highlights Iyayi's lexical choice which it describes as "highly combative, suggestive of his radical Marxist orientation". His choice of words is said to be desirous of change from the status quo ante". A ready example is this

use of “poverty as captivity” and the euphemistic use of “market” to refer to “hospital” where the “Ogbe hospital is described as even bigger market of patients than the university hospital” (Violence 56).

There are a lot of other critical works on *Violence*, including “The Politics of Bread: The Human Perspective in Festus Iyayi’s *Violence*” by Ezenwa-Ohaeto among others. However, much has not been done on Ndubuisi George’s *Woes of Ikenga* as it is a relatively new work. But the review of the text indicates that, “there is progressive awareness widespread among the Igbos at home and in diaspora concerning the “Greener Pasture” illusion. *Woes of Ikenga* presents a window-view to what life in Europe could be like; and at the same time a doorway to liberation for the victims of an “Idealised Treasure Island” (*Afuecheta*). This paper, “Neo-Slavery and Sexual Exploitation” seeks to explore incidences of exploitation and sexual intimidation of female characters found in the texts. Specifically, the prevailing situations and circumstances of manipulation will be examined. The paper seeks to point out the economic gap and poverty that catalyzed the sexual exploitation.

Sexual Exploitation in the Texts

Sexual exploitation has become a new form of slavery, as it seems to be a frequent occurrence in even unanticipated circumstances and times. Nigerian literary atmosphere has records and representations of textual narratives and instances which smack of sexual exploitation, especially of the female characters. For example, in Adichie’s *Half of A Yellow Sun*, female children and young girls are easy prey to the licentious claws of the exploiters. Situations such as war and hunger create palpable instances that put those female elements into danger of these evil enterprise of sexual exploitation and intimidation. Most evidently, the sad situation of helplessness of Eberechi in succumbing to the wiles of the soldier who takes advantage of her, as arranged almost by her family, for the sake of her brother, is a war situation. She tells Ugwu “about her parents” pushing her into the army officer’s room... he had a big belly; he did it quickly and then told me to lie on top of him... he helped us. He put my brother in essential services in the army” (294). This scenario depicts coercion, helplessness and intimidation, being that Eberechi, the poor girl is taken advantage of, caused by war situation, hunger and insecurity. The family needs to survive and so she is made the sacrificial tool to achieve their end.

Another instance of this, a teenage girl in a refugee camp, Urenwa, is sexually violated and exploited by Father Marcel in exchange for milk. As reported, that “a young girl named Urenwa’s belly began to grow and Kainene

was not sure if it was kwashiorkor or pregnancy until the girl's mother slapped her and asked, who?" (390). The reality of her pregnancy when revealed indicates that some other young girls are also victims of Father Marcel's sexual escapades, as Kainene tells her sister Olanna, "apparently I've been blind; she's not the only one He fucks most of them before he gives the crayfish that I slave to get here!" (399). The story is so pathetic. The children are victims of war situation and hunger and so they fall under the manipulation and lure of food to allow themselves be taken advantage of. This is the height of depravity coming from a priest and at such a lowly place as the refugee camp, where there are constant death and smell of rotten bodies.

There are also incidents of rape that happen due to the war situation. It is recorded that some army officers took advantage of the girls in the village. Nnesinachi lived with a soldier and even has a child for him for the sake of protection. She narrates her story to Ugwu, "I did not marry."..."I lived with a Hausa soldier"... "They were living in our town and he was good to me, a very kind man" (421). This reveals the level of sexual slavery suffered by Nnesinachi. Other young girls are raped too, including Anulika, Ugwu's own sister, who was raped by five soldiers. Nnesinachi continues her tale to Ugwu: "They said the first one that climbed on top of her, she bit him on the arm and drew blood. They nearly beat her to death. One of her eyes has refused to open well since" (421). This experience comes with a lot of trauma and loss of self-esteem as Orabueze observes that "in the case of the rape victims there is no consent on the part of Anulika as the five soldiers rape her" (247). There is also the case of the rape of a bar girl by soldiers who after drinking took turn in molesting her sexually. Ugwu is a culprit who takes advantage of the war situation to join in the abuse of the bar girl. Their sexual escapades with the girl is graphically described in the text, "the bar girl was lying on her back on the floor, her wrapper bunched up at her waist, her shoulders held down by a soldier, her legs wide, wide ajar. She was sobbing, please, please, biko...." (365). Commenting on the dastardly act of the soldiers, Orabueze writes that Ugwu's rape of the bar girl with the other young soldiers, is a consequence of the dispossession of his Oedipus complex as a result of the war. It also typifies the lowering moral standard during the war and women as the silent victims of war crises" (246). These incidents are stark examples of exploitative power relationship.

Festus Iyayi presents issues of exploitation and intimidation as a power relation in the text. Here, the class distinction between the bourgeoisie and the wretched is conspicuous. This is captured by Ademola who says that in *Violence*, Iyayi fiercely portrays Nigeria's extreme of poverty and wealth. He sensitizes

the readership to the vicious features of the capitalist society "where little or no opportunity is open to the greater majority of the people" (131). The labourers even suffer extreme hardship. Idemudia reminiscences of the past reveal daily ordeal of "labourers at Iyaro, to the petrol station, to the tyres on which they sat, to the loose stories by the water tower on which they sat, to the gutters, filled with refuse by which they all gathered and wanted.... How could he go back to all these things, to the overpowering heat of the sun, to the numbness of hunger, to the despair of returning home each evening after a day's long wait?" (154). This is the scenario the poor find themselves in, including Idemudia and Adisa, a poor couple. Adisa needs to find money so that her husband Idemudia could be discharged from the hospital. In this confusion and helplessness, Adisa runs into Obofun who tactfully took her to his guest room. The conversation following the meeting reveals that "he had conquered her" (170), and "he went to a side drawer and drew out an envelop. He threw it on the bed beside her.... I will get one of my pick-ups to send you the cartons of whisky tomorrow morning. Around ten o'clock. You should be outside to receive them" (171). Obofun has taken advantage of the sad situation of Adisa who at the moment is in a state of helplessness and want. As she finds herself in Obofun's net, and considering her predicament, "within her, she knew she was defeated" (168). Poverty and want make her lose her will power to resist Obofun's sexual advances.

In confirming the level of poverty in the text, Ezenwa-Obaeto states that "it is through the presentation of the acute suffering by Idemudia that Iyayi explores the rudiments of the politics of bread" (44). He states further: "the novel depicts with insightful accuracy the stark reality of the poor and wretched members of the society. The portrayal of reality is presented through harsh circumstances of life especially in the case of Idemudia" (44). "Women who are exploited usually found themselves in a fix making them vulnerable to the whims of the lascivious and lustful men. The case of Adisa resembles that of Okpewho's Aku in *The Last Duty* captured by Emenike and Asuzu in "Sexual Exploitation and the Nigerian Civil War: A Study of Okpewho's *The Last Duty*", where Aku suffers want due to the disappearance of her husband. As noted, "Aku's husband having been taken away, she is devoid of care and protection which ultimately exposes her to abuse and exploitation" (142-3). Aku bemoans her state of helplessness and dejection that result from the war situation. She becomes a sex object for Toje who offers her assistance in return for sex.

Likewise, Adisa bemoans her predicament, coming out of abject poverty. She thinks of her situation: "Idemudia was ill, Obofun had demanded

more than a pound of her flesh, and her aunt had refused to help her.....she hoped that Idemudia would be better. She hoped that some miracle would happen to change the course of events" (139). These women are cut in between war and economic depravity. This situation is projected by Lunga in "a Postcolonial Ecofeminist Comparative Analysis of War Fiction..." asserting that "women are portrayed as destitute who stay in subservient conditions at the mercy of patriarchal societies, with no voice, sex objects for the husbands' pleasures and that can be exchanged for material wealth". This exchange of material wealth smacks of exploitation and manipulation, becoming the bane of sexual exploitation.

The need to survive poverty is the same that pushes young girls into cross border sex slavery as recorded in Ndubuisi's *Woes of Ikenga*. In the text, young girls do not have a better choice other than to feed the impious manipulative intents of the men folk in order to allow the women enjoy some help and a level of freedom. Stella with the consent of her mother embarks on a journey to Italy in order to help change the family's fortune ridden with poverty. As it is written: "life had become unbearable when her father,... was buried alive in a local mining accident...she had agreed with her mother...that the only way the family could ever lead a better life was if she toed the part of her mates" (76). Stella is described as a beautiful young girl with a mission to help lift her family from poverty, as she travels along with other migrants including, Ikenga. In the course of the sojourn, "she found favour with Erimoje, the President of the Al-khalifi gang, after her dislodgment from Morocco when upon their arrival, she and some other girls had been distributed to the top leaders of the sect, as the norm was that women engage in prostitution while the men were deployed to do some other menial jobs to be able to raise enough money for the journey ahead" (78). Much of the activities and survival of the young ladies and most others are on the mercy of the males. Women suffer a lot of manipulations and intimidations in order to forge ahead in their quest for a better living. The texts reveal that certain situations such as war time, economic hardships, illness and other conditions of vulnerability put women in an inescapable corner for sexual exploitation as a way of temporary relief from their problems.

Conclusion

Sexual exploitation as a new form of slavery thrives due to unfavourable socio-economic circumstances. Incidents of war, pandemic and poverty are veritable enzymes that activate desperateness and pain in the people. Unfortunately,

women, young ladies and children are at the receiving end. The 21st century Nigeria should cue into the global best practices that regulate policies that see to the welfare of the populace. Issues concerning, especially the women and children, should receive priority attention by providing adequate infrastructure and manpower to cater for their welfare. There should be adequate provisions of basic needs of the people for their wellbeing, namely shelter, food, clothing, healthcare and empowerment for the female gender and young male adults by the government. Other secondary needs obviously escalate in the face of the non-availability or absence of the basic needs.

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