

Neo-Liberal Nigeria and Sex Trafficking in Nigerian Women's Writings

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Abstract. Human sex trafficking is a global plague, its magnitude staggering, robbing women of their sense of worth and dignity as human persons. With the case of Nigeria, the collapse of the post-colonial nation and the effects of neo-liberal policies have left the country steeped in corruption and poverty. A byproduct of this chaos is symptomatically reflected in the trafficking of Nigerian women into various parts of Europe and the United Kingdom, hoodwinked into fake job offers overseas to relieve their families from poverty. To understand the impact of such an unconscionable exploitation of Nigerian women as resources for the global capitalist flesh trade, a close qualitative analysis of literary novels, specifically Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), Akachi Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* (2008) and Abidemi Sanusi's *Eyo* (2009) in this paper will be used to demonstrate a representation of Nigerian female characters resisting the liminal spaces of sex trafficking they are forced into through their psychology of willfulness to access freedom. Also, the representations of these Nigerian female characters create an intricate web for us to understand the alarmingly systematic, highly regulated movement and exploitation of modern slavery. The results of this analysis demonstrate the female characters challenging their traffickers through their situation at their point zero space and escape to freedom, yet in their homecoming many turn to trafficking again due to high levels of poverty. Furthermore, Sanusi, Ezeigbo and Unigwe's writings ultimately serve as a conglomeration of literary works of protest that function as a clarion call to end the dehumanization of Nigerian women through sex trafficking.

Keywords: Sex Trafficking, Nigeria, Women, Literature, Neo-Liberal, Representation

1. Introduction

Sex trafficking has become a growing social issue where human beings have become commodities. In a neo-liberal state where economic freedom and liberalization are systems set in place to create an ostensibly more egalitarian society of equal resources and opportunities, this has been habituated to become a profit making industry by traffickers who use the false pretenses of better lives abroad to lure people who suffer high levels of poverty. Particularly with the context of Nigeria, the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) during the Babaginda regime inherited from the Obasanjo regime, opened the country to neo-liberal economic policies which did not grant ascendancy to the country's market forces but instead increased its international debt, internal corruption, overvaluation of the naira, and decline into poverty. The optimism of economic growth that flourished during the initial years of independence and after the civil war dissipated after nearly thirty years of military dictatorship, indifferent political leaders and financial misgovernment which limited benefits for many people, making everyday living hard for most Nigerians. Estimated economic figures from 2005 show that 91 percent of Nigerians live under two dollars per day (Kara 260). On the other hand, research shows that approximately "40,000 to 50,000 Nigerian women have become victims of trafficking [sexual exploitation, forced labor, the removal of organs or servitude] over the past 15 years [1990-2005]", yet specific figures on Nigerian women forced into sex trafficking are unobtainable given the complex organizational infrastructure, migration routes and transit stays used to traffic victims (Carling 45). This paper will argue how the effect of Nigeria's descent into a neo-liberal

economic structure has left its women vulnerable to transnational crimes of human trafficking, commonly referred to as modern day slavery, specifically focusing on sex trafficking as a form of neo-liberal economic commodity. A comparative analysis of Abidemi Sanusi's *Eyo* (2009), Akachi Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* (2008) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) will give us a firsthand account on the business of trafficking women, the geographies of globalization that generate conditions for such trafficking as well as the reimagining of trafficking through resistance displayed by female characters who challenge the complex relations of power with their traffickers.

For this analysis we locate our discourse within the framework of womanist theory expounded by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Alice Walker. There are many varying epistemological positions in which Nigerian women's writings may be visibly situated, an accretion of theories such as African feminism, stiwanism (from STIWA: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), Africana Womanism and so on which ultimately conglomerate towards expressions of various scholars' stances. Particularly confounding to this discussion is the location of African feminist theory within African women's writings. Although African feminist theorists like Carol Boyce Davies, and Susan Arndt articulate African feminism as a theory that combines feminist concerns with African concerns, the viability of African feminism is challenged by Africana womanist theorist Clenora Hudson-Weems who articulates the impossibility of amalgamating feminism into African concerns as feminism was "conceptualized and adopted by White women, involves an agenda that was designed to meet the needs and demands of that particular group" (Hudson-Weems, 47). Although debatable, this perspective cannot be overlooked and we find first and second generation African women writers like Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba themselves being defensive and indignant whenever they are referred to as feminist. Thus, embedded within the African female struggle for self-articulation, womanhood and empowerment is the greater battle to define evolving ideologies and theories which we hope is a process that will be progressively clarified and elucidated. As such, Ogunyemi and Walker's womanist theory is used in these Nigerian women's writings as a line of inquiry to examine the challenges post-independent Nigerian female characters face, theorizing the global magnitude of victimization faced by trafficked Nigerian women. Although Alice Walker's womanist theory draws on the African-American experience, we find her definition of womanist theory useful in providing a wholesome definition of the female quest for womanhood and empowerment. Moreover, it is relevant to use Walker's and Ogunyemi's discourse of womanist theory concurrently as their definitions overlap, implying a general concern for the development and self-definition of the Black female subject, in this context the resistance showed by trafficked Nigerian female characters as epitomizing the womanist process towards self-actualization and agency.

Before proceeding into the complexities of analyzing the points of resistance revealed through the representation of Nigerian female characters, it is important for us to return to a more general frame of reference, acknowledging the global scale of sex trafficking and the sheer immensity as well as intricate transnational network of organized crime that facilitates the smuggling, coercion, intimidation and violence against women and children. Professional traffickers prey on the destitution of women who long to provide better conditions of living for their families. These women are hoodwinked either by family friends or lured by false job advertisements that offer lucrative opportunities. The magnitude of sex trafficking worldwide is staggering, the perverseness of selling women for immense profits shocking as it leaves a destructive trail in its path. Siddharth Kara's *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* (2009) argues

profit numbers [...] indicate that trafficked sex slaves are by far the most lucrative slaves in the world. Only 4.2 percent of the world's slaves are trafficked sex slaves, but they generate 39.1 percent of slaveholders' profits [...] By comparison, Google's net profit margin in 2006 was 29.0 percent, and it is one of the most profitable companies in the United States. The same figure for Microsoft was 28.5 percent; for Intel, 14.3 percent. General Electric posted 12.8 percent profit margin; AT&T, 11.7 percent; and Exxon Mobil, 10.8 percent. It may seem like a stretch to make direct comparisons between multinational corporations and ramshackle brothels, but the superficial point should be clear: Slave labor makes profits soar. (19-22)

For this reason, the economics of sex trafficking has attracted crime syndicates all over the world into partaking of this burgeoning business. Kara's disconcerting comparison evidently places the senseless

disregard for human dignity in perspective which we will later see communicated in Nigerian women's writings.

Table 1: Selected Demographic and Economic Indicators of Nigeria

Figures	Entire Population, 2010 (millions)	Income Per Capita, 2006 (Purchasing Power Parity)	GDP Per Capita Growth 1990-2005 (Percent)	Average Annual Rate of Inflation, 1990-2005 (Percent)	Population Living Under \$2 per day, 2005 (Percent)
Nigeria	158.2	1,154	0.0	23	91
	Deportees for prostitution offences from Europe (1999 -2003)	Purchase Price of Sex Slaves in Italy (Euros)	Price of Sex Act (Euros)		
Nigeria	19,774	—	20		

Sources: World Bank, online statistics database, available at <http://econ.worldbank.org>; Toyin Falola's *The Human Cost of African Migration* 2007; Siddharth Kara's *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* 2009; tables 3.1, C.1 and C.2.

As tabulated in table 1, Nigeria's poverty, corruption, violence and criminal activities are some of the factors that hamper the nation's development. Such conditions are a perfect breeding ground within a neo-liberal context of supply and demand to forge human beings as commodities with high turnovers. Victor Opara places the business of sex trafficking in perspective when he states "as a result of Nigeria's oil resources, it is more economically viable than most African countries. Since poverty is a major reason why African women fall prey to trafficking, if an oil-rich country like Nigeria is unable to fend for its residents, it logically follows that most African countries would not be able to stop trafficking on their own" (170). Statistics reveal that "against [the] backdrop [of deported, dead and maimed trafficking victims], it appears that the estimates of the U.S Diplomatic Mission to Nigeria that as of May 2003, as many as 300,000 [Nigerian women] have been trafficked since 1997" (172). Most Nigerians are trafficked to various destinations in Europe and the United Kingdom. Many are often trafficked and re-trafficked to various owners before escaping or returning home. Similarly like many other women across the globe, they too are motivated by the opportunity of supporting their families with income from abroad, making connections through informal networks such as friends and relatives who eventually facilitate their trafficking. Once they arrive at their destination, these women are raped, beaten and humiliated into submission, ensuring they never try to escape. Their vulnerability is compounded by the fact that their passports and papers are taken away and kept by their traffickers, sealing their fate to a life of slavery. Through the representations of Eyo (*Eyo*), Sisi (*On Black Sisters' Street*), Efe (*On Black Sisters' Street*), Joyce (*On Black Sisters' Street*), Ama (*On Black Sisters' Street*), Nneoma (*Trafficked*) and Efe's (*Trafficked*) experience of trafficking, Nigerian women writers create for us an intricate web to understand the alarmingly systematic, highly regulated movement and exploitation of modern slavery.

Figure 1: The concentric involvement of Nigerian women in global organized crime

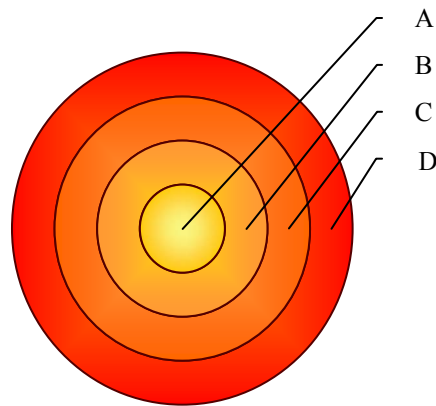


Figure 1 illustrates the involvement of Nigerian women as resources for the global capitalist flesh trade and the role played by Nigerian women writers in revealing this social suffering. Set A represents women who are vulnerable targets to trafficking from their poverty stricken lives heightened with the implementation of structural adjustment programs which exacerbate their coercion into commercial sex by organized syndicates. Set B represents the local organized syndicate that recruits and sponsor these women's travel by forging passports, visas as well as the travel fare. Set C represents the international, global crime syndicates that trap Nigerian women through acts of violence to a subjugated life of slavery. Finally, Set D represents the role of Nigerian women writer's works in accounting for this social tragedy in order to raise public awareness.

2. The Dynamics of Trafficking in Nigerian Women's Writings: Complex Power Relations and Resistance

Exploitation through violent coercion and control is depicted in the works of Ezeigbo, Sanusi and Unigwe as the method used by traffickers to ensure submission and subjugation from their victims. In resistance to this male dominant ideology of power and control, *Trafficked* (2008), Eyo (2009) and *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) reveals the economic, social and political factors that facilitate the oppression of women who are trafficked and how Nigerian female characters challenge the conditions of their lives as trafficked women, subverting existing relations of power. The female process from enslavement towards freedom mirrors Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Alica Walker's womanist progression where victims of sex trafficking find ways to speak out and find a voice for themselves from liminal spaces, emerging with repertoires of skills that reflect tangible signs of personal freedom. Having articulated this, it is also vital for us to remember that the female process of empowerment is also fraught with ambivalence as these female characters face the similar challenges of poverty and disillusionment in their homecoming to Nigeria which can lead them back to the similar cycle of victimization.

Ezeigbo, Sanusi and Unigwe demonstrate how men in Nigeria use women as a form of commodity in their neo-liberal economy to gain personal wealth, which ultimately serve their own gratification. Their power is sustained through the reliance on the internalization by women of the tenets of slavery, submission and abuse. In each the texts, female characters are like pawns whose lives are orchestrated by brokers. Yet it is within these volatile experiences emerge the development of the female womanist through resistance. Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) tells us the stories of four African sex workers sharing an apartment in Antwerp's red light district. The dead Sisi in the text is the woman whose story in many ways is the most tragic, and the most telling for the premise of this argument. In the chapters that lead up to her death, Unigwe unfolds Sisi's story by interlacing her story with that of Efe, Joyce and Ama revealing the effect of a neo-colonial, neo-liberal Nigerian state to a promising, intelligent graduate like Sisi. Sisi's life refers to the big questions that operate at a national and global level in regards to sex trafficking. Indicatively, Unigwe

uses Sisi's narrative to embody the collective narratives of women who have been disembodied through violent subjugation and by hierarchies of local and international political and economical exploitation. Sisi's representation in the text can be used as a basis to reticulate the narrative representations of other Nigerian female characters like Eyo, Efe and Nneoma. Sisi's story reasserts the tragedy of a neo-colonial Nigerian state, where its leaders and their well connected boon companions who "[plunge] into the mire of corruption and pleasure" (Fanon 134). Hence, "for those who practise [neo-colonialism], it [meant] power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it [meant] exploitation without redress", the epitome of Sisi's life (Nkrumah xi). Unigwe unashamedly expresses the abject poverty and exploitation faced by the average Nigerian attempting to make a meager living, juxtaposing this reality with that of Dele's (the trafficker's) 'good' intentions of providing 'goods' for the supply and demand within entrenching economic liberalizations. The direct questioning of Nigeria's corrupt, masculine political leadership is targeted to the Obasanjo regime's multiple-forms of self-serving hypocrisy depicted by the prestigious and sophisticated lifestyles led by his family members, "Obasanjo's own children, were they being forced to do *things* just to survive? She had heard that they were at Ivy League universities in the US" (201-2). Particularly useful to this discussion is the contrast created between Sisi's positioning and that of Obasanjo's children's positioning within societal structures. Although both sets of individuals have acquired an education, Sisi is placed within the circumferential location in society, forced into sex trafficking to survive. This location however becomes a hybrid breeding ground for resistance as Unigwe uses this volatile ground to create a self-claimed space for women who experience sex trafficking. Sisi's first act of resistance stems from her desire for change, to experience love and build a family with Luc. Her second step comes from her verbalizing Dele's exploitation and her refusal to no longer participate in her victimization. The final stage of Sisi's resistance happens in an in-between state of life and death, emphasizing freedom as well as vengeance. This in-between space of resistance can be mirrored to that space which can be called a point zero stage, very much like that space experienced by Nawal El Saadawi's Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) who uses her space as a locked up prostitute waiting for execution in prison as a way of resisting the male discourse of exploitation and subjugation. Similarly, in-between life and death, Sisi offers an impasse phase of reclaiming her life, refusing to be subjected to authority, cursing Dele in death through his children "'May your lives be bad. May you never enjoy love. May your father suffer as much as mine will when he hears I am gone. May you ruin him.' For Sisi was not the sort to forgive. Not even in death. Sisi's soul flew down the stairs and began its journey to another world (296)".

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Nneoma and Efe in *Trafficked* (2008) mirror similar point zero accounts through their homecoming experience in Nigeria and attempt to renegotiate their space within society. The clinch point in Ezeigbo's text is the threat of re-trafficking experienced by Nneoma and Efe by the same syndicate Baron who was Nneoma's cruel pimp before her escape. Although Efe encounters Baron when she returns to Nigeria after being deported from trafficking, and is unwittingly attracted to him, she does not let her disappointment of Baron dissuade her from having a good life or neither does she immediately run away from him. She chooses instead to confront her 'prospective' oppressor and Nneoma's former exploiter in an open bar "Is your name truly Fyeface, or is it Baron [...] Baron's face twitched and fear filled his eyes. He thought Efe might be a detective or a member of the Secret Security Service [...] "You're a liar. You have lied to me all this while. You're Baron and a bloody trafficker. Her voice was loud and heads were beginning to turn [...] This man is a cheat and an exploiter. He is here to traffick women abroad" (186-7). Unlike Sisi, who faces her oppressor in death, Efe and Nneoma both participate in resisting Baron in this point zero space of reality where the oppressor is forced to remain stagnant while the female character achieves her goal of 'objectifying' the trafficker, subverting his privileged position of power, rejecting authority. By doing this, Ezeigbo not only reveals to us the continuous cycle of trafficking syndicates but she also aptly creates an intersecting space within fiction to contest what cannot be said directly to these exploiters, again challenging the privileged position of existing relations of power by propositioning her own authoritative voice. Likewise, Abidemi Sanusi's *Eyo* (2009) continues in this pattern of counteraction through physical aggression. Eyo's resistance surfaces in the text when her oppressors least expects it, when it is assumed that "any spiritedness left in the women would've have been broken by his fists and particular brand of sexual gratification" (199). After experiencing numerous forms of abuse, from rape, abortion to performing sexual acts with multiple

men and an animal on camera, Eyo's anger is deflected back to her pimp in his sleep as "she came back into the flat, she was holding a baseball bat [...] She advanced towards the bed with the baseball bat firmly in her hands. She lifted up her hands and brought the bat down hard on Johnny's face. And she didn't stop" (238). Interestingly, in this point zero moment, the male aggressor is placed in a silent submissive position of sleep, no movement, while the female position from liminality is empowered to action. While Eyo's narrative of resistance ends on a note of ambivalence with her returning to trafficking, one cannot help but see the point further driven home by Sanusi that the state of the Nigerian neo-liberal economy is unable to sustain its people, where women have no choice but to be a part of its 'goods'. Undoubtedly however, the womanist character's development from menarche and an epiphany (Ogunyemi) while recognizing her commitment to society (Walker) is depicted collectively by these female characters as they develop into womanist characters who through their words and actions rebel against the female experience of silencing, domination and subjugation. Here, we may extend womanist theory to include this 'point zero' space to the developmental process of the womanist, to recognize the location where aspects of resistance are experienced.

3. Conclusion

In a compassionate engagement with issues of sex trafficking, it is vital for us to recognize the role of Nigerian women writers in using literature as a basis to establish the fundamental socio-economic and political issues that plague Nigeria today, the representation of Nigerian female stories that signify experiential truths. The framework that paramount's the 'business' of modern slavery today is very much like that which dominated the Atlantic slave trade 350 years ago. Yet, while there was then the existence of the Underground Railroad of freedom to assist the abolition of slavery, this is today replaced by an underground criminal network that entraps and sells people into slavery. This indeed is a tragic paradox in our time, one which continues to be a hidden crime. Yet the core focus of our discussion here has been to analyse the fundamental characteristics and resistance shown by the enslaved person's life through Sanusi, Ezeigbo and Unigwe's writings, a conglomeration of literary works of protest that function as a clarion call to end the dehumanization of Nigerian women through sex trafficking .

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