

**PROSTITUTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS  
VIOLATION: A STUDY OF CHIKA UNIGWE'S  
*ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET* AND AKACHI  
ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *TRAFFICKED***

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**Abstract**

Prostitution has been regarded as a global phenomenon in which one's fundamental rights are being encroached upon. However, this phenomenon is escalating at an unprecedented scale with severe implications on the human rights of the victims. This paper therefore examines prostitution and human rights violation using Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*. The novels expose the socio-economic conditions of Nigerian women and their harrowing experiences in diaspora as prostitutes... The paper adopts Radical Feminism theory which sees prostitution as sexual exploitation and a vehicle of oppression used by men to subjugate women. The research methodology is library oriented. The paper discovers that many Nigerian women involved in prostitution did not go into it out of their own volition. They are pushed into prostitution by prevalent socio-economic pressures in Nigeria. The women therefore are victims of circumstances who have unfortunately fallen prey to the snares of heartless traffickers and avaricious agencies that specialize in trafficking and prostitution. The paper concludes that

the men and women should make the society a better place by cooperating with each other to celebrate modernity and the Nigerian government should create job opportunities, so as to alleviate poverty, arrests any procurer or trafficker, create sensitization programmes that can educate not only women but also parents and family members on the dangers associated with prostitution.

**Keywords:** Prostitution, Sex Slavery, Radical Feminism, Human Rights, Patriarchy, Sex Trafficking.

### **Introduction**

Prostitution has been regarded as a global phenomenon in which one's fundamental rights are being encroached upon. According to statistics, of 800,000 people trafficked across national borders annually, 63 percent are women trafficked specifically for purpose of sexual exploitation. In this age of globalization, one expects these numbers to escalate as the inequalities and the economic disparities between the developing and developed worlds continue at the present pace. Acero (2001, p.29) observes in a study that conditions of exploitation in the Third world create extreme vulnerability for poor women to succumb to pressure to sell their bodies for sex both in local and international spaces. She asserts that "women who are sold or trafficked for prostitution are seldom from developed countries. Typically, they belong to the global south or to other countries undergoing distressing economic conditions".

Prostitution is indulgence in promiscuous sexual activity for payment, without any emotional attachment being involved. According to Qayyum et al (2013, p.398), prostitution "is the business or practice of providing sexual services to another person in return for payment". It is "the act or practice of engaging in sexual activities for money or its equivalent" (Garner, in Aloba and Ndifon, 2004, p.1). James in Gungul and Samson (2014, p.1) writes that prostitution can be defined "as the business or practice of engaging in sexual relations in exchange for financial reward".

In overall view, this means that prostitution involves buying and selling or asymmetrical relationship of exchange in which the prostitute provides sexual services and the customer supplies, recompense for those services, usually in the form of money. Money is therefore the key feature of prostitution. As such, money is also the major motivation for women who become prostitutes, as most of them come from low income backgrounds.

Prostitution occurs in a variety of forms and its legality varies from country to country thus reflecting different opinions on exploitation, gender, roles, freedom of choice, social norms, ethics and morality. According to Nwahunanya (2011, p.349) some countries “see prostitution as a source of income to government coffers, since a number of tourists may find the availability of youthful prostitutes a good reason to travel to those countries where prostitutes operate without legal restriction”.

Prostitution as a way of life in the city was first depicted by Cyprian Ekwensi in *Jagua Nana*. In the novel, Ekwensi sees the profession as a debasing and dehumanizing act. One remarkable feature of Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana*, is that it portrays prostitutes who are economically independent (Jagua and Mama Nancy) unlike the works of 21st Century African writers. Thus, while the works of the 20th Century African writers like Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe and several others portray prostitutes as economically independent, that of the 21st Century African writers like Chika Unigwe *On Black Sisters’ Street* (2010), Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo *Trafficked*(2008), Abidemi Sanusi *Eyo*(2009), Bisi Ojdiran *A Daughter for Sale*(2006), Ifeanyi Ajaegbo *Sarah House*(2013), Ikechukwu Asika *Tamara* (2013) and Ifeoma Chinwuba *Merchants of Flesh* (2003) portray prostitutes that are enslaved and therefore subjected to sexual violence and exploitation by their masters and mistresses. As a result, they struggle to regain their freedom and independence.

However, in most African countries like Nigeria, women are socio-economically disadvantaged. As a result, they improvise to search for greener pastures in a transforming world but

opportunistic predators seize upon the vulnerability of the desperate. Thus, the women become principle victims of traffickers who coerce them into prostitution. Traffickers are notorious for their aplomb in identifying vulnerable women who entertain visions of a better life and may be more susceptible to deceptive job opportunities in a foreign country. Once they arrive at their destination, it is often too late for these vulnerable women to escape the web of deceit as they are relegated to a life of sex slavery, specifically prostitution. As prostitutes Kamalu and Ejezie (2016, p. 2) point out that they are “bonded sex machines who must first satisfy the economic interests of their masters and mistresses before they can obtain their freedom and independence”. In other words, these women are held against their will to perform sex. This situation according to Reanda (1991, p.202) violates human rights because “it involves overt coercion or exploitation”. Barry (1997, p.28) says that “degrading a person’s humanity, reducing her into an object ... the object becomes a commodity for market exchange, like any other object on (sic) the market... for one’s own sexual use is a violation of human rights”.

Specifically, human rights are privileges and opportunities which a person is entitled to by the simple virtue of the fact that he is a human being. Donnelly (2013, p. 2) refers to it as “the rights of man”, as “literally the rights that one has because one is human”. United Nations explain that they are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. These rights include “the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education ... and everyone is entitled to these rights without discrimination”.

Consequently, the victims not only experience high levels of violence, like physical assaults, sexual assaults, verbal threats or abuse, psychological abuse, robbery and kidnapping, they are also at high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STDS) , increased risk for cervical cancer and psychosis. There are also the dangers of pregnancy and abortion.

## **Theoretical Framework**

One theory that helps to better understand women prostitution is Radical Feminism. This is a branch of feminism that was formed during the second wave of feminism which started from 1960s to 1980s. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights are dominant issues, and much of the movement's energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex. Some key radical feminists are; Ti-Grace Atkinson, Susan Brownmiller, Phyllis Chester, Corrine Grad Coleman, Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer, Carol Hanisch, Jill Johnson, Catherine Mackinnon, Kate Millett, Robin Morgan, Ellen Willis and Monique Wittig.

Unlike other feminists, radical feminists perceive themselves as the revolutionaries rather than reformers. Tong (2009, p. 48) points out that these revolutionaries did not become interested in women's issues as a result of working for government agencies, "being appointed to commissions on the status of women, or joining women's educational or professional groups. Instead, their desire to improve women's condition emerged in the context of their participation in radical social movements, such as the civil-rights and anti-Vietnam war movements". Unlike other forms of feminism that viewed power as something positive as long as it was evenly distributed, the revolutionaries believed that power is something experienced in a dualistic system of domination and subordination with one party always experiencing oppression. Therefore, they are interested in sexuality and reproductive rights and aim to oppose patriarchy not men.

Radical feminists believe that prostitution is sexual exploitation and a vehicle of oppression. According to this theory, men, and the male-dominated system, oppress women and prostitution is just another way of keeping women down by perpetuating a system of gender inequality where men are permissively consumers of women. Radical feminists are of the view that prostitution should

not be legalized in any capacity, and therefore should absolutely be banned.

One of the greatest concerns about prostitution from a radical stand point is the conflation of the female body with a consumable item that it is for sale. This contributes to a system wherein women are regarded as objects and are therefore objectified. The same argument extends to the radical feminist crusade to end pornography in the 1970s, which lead to the passage of the Dworkin-Mackinnon Ordinance in Indianapolis, or legislative effort to have pornography declared a violation of women's civil rights, although the ordinance was later struck down as being in violation of the first amendment. The argument against pornography by radical feminists is based on socially constructed notions about heterosexuality that place male sexuality as dominant and female sexuality as submissive.

In her essay, *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the state: An Agenda for Theory*, radical feminist leader Catherine Mackinnon (1982, p.22) explores the idea of female sexuality as constructed solely via its relationship to men's sexuality: "A woman is a being who identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male". In other words, women's sexuality under patriarchy cannot be theirs but that which incites desire in men.

Radical feminists claim patriarchy is the main source of women's oppression, positioning male as the dominant self and women as the submissive other. They claim that women are vulnerable to violence in a patriarchal society. This vulnerability to violence positions women as potential victims and according to radical feminists, pornography is a form of rape, which is considered violence against women. The connection between pornography and prostitution is justified through the belief that both are a source of violence against women. Suffice it to say that pornography and prostitution, as supported by the patriarchal system of dominance, serve as elements of the oppression of women because both permit violence against women.

This theory sees the issue of the trafficking of women into prostitution as problematic because it does not allow prostitutes to assert their agency. This is because women are coerced into prostitution and therefore they become sexual slaves (Barry,1984). Prostitutes' position as sexual slaves force them into a passive role in which men such as traffickers, pimps, customers (Johns) assume dominance. According to radical feminism, lack of control over one's sexual agency is equivalent to rape because women cannot refuse sex with a man in their position as a sexual slave. The trafficking of women into prostitution constitutes sexual slavery that perpetuates violence against women. Violence, in this case comes in the form of non consensual entrance into prostitution.

Some radical feminists have proposed ways to approach the problem of prostitution via the legal system, but most propose either widespread social change or a total ban on the sale of any sort of sexual service (prostitution, massage parlors, escort services, etc). Even those who are pro-decriminalization like Ericsson (1980, p.31) advocate for fundamental social change, saying, "The 'oppressor' is rather those social conditions present in practically all known social systems which offer some individuals (both men and women no better alternative to" prostitution. Many radical feminists advocate for social change that includes eradicating poverty as a goal central to achieving gender equality.

### **Expressions of Oppression and Exploitation of the Female Body in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*.**

Unigwe and Adimora-Ezeigbo are prolific writers whose works *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Trafficked* respectively portray to a large extent issues concerning the oppression and exploitation of women in prostitution in a male dominated society. Precisely, these writers culminated by capturing the experiences of the Nigerian women in prostitution outside the shores of their continent. This is reminiscent of Nnolim's (2006, p.4) charge to African writers in the 21st century that they should forget the "complexes of the past

and be more imaginatively aggressive and expansive, invading other continents and even the skies as new settings, striving to have a global outlook in his creative output mounting a new international phase and not limiting his canvas to the African soil". The novels recall the place and excruciating experiences of the Africans during the trans-Atlantic Slave trade of the 17th and 18th Century. The relationship was marked with exploitation.

A look at the background of the women in the two novels attest to their vulnerability. In Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. She portrays how women have very limited job opportunities. Sisi, is a graduate in Finance and Business Administration, at the University of Lagos, but is unable to find a suitable job. In a country like Nigeria, where nepotism and favoritism are widespread, having zero connections and being female mean that a newly graduated young woman has zero chance to get a decent job. Sisi admits that getting a job in a bank does not demand intelligence but "connections" (22). Of course failure to secure a job in her home country pushed Sisi into prostitution. Her other co-workers are also victims of patriarchal oppression. Efe lost her virginity at the age of sixteen and thereafter becomes a single mother struggling to raise her son, Ama is sexually abused by her step father, Brother Cyril, Joyce is from a civil war background and a victim of violence and rape.

Seemingly similar to the conditions of the four protagonists of Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, is the three protagonists, Nneoma, Efe and Alice of Adimora Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*. Nneoma, attended a teachers' training college and thus has a National certificate of education but she is jobless. Her father who had retired from his civil service job, took to alcohol because he could not be paid "his retirement gratuity" (71) several years after retirement. Her financial predicament worsens when her relationship with her fiancé is in crisis. She becomes desperate to leave the village. Consequently, when her classmate and friend tells her that an agency had helped her secure a teaching appointment in the United Kingdom, she flees the village without



telling her family her whereabouts. Efe reveals to Nneoma that she comes from a very poor family. “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). Therefore, when she sees an advertisement in a newspaper asking “young men and women who wished to work abroad to come to certain address” (99) she sees it as a golden opportunity to leave the country. Alice’s experiences further lend credence to the point as she explains “I am a graduate with a good degree. If I had a job I wouldn’t have been trafficked, I wouldn’t have ended up in this horrible place” (165). Thus, she is a jobless graduate, that is why she falls prey to the tantalizing promises of the traffickers.

In Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Adimora Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked*, the writers present their protagonists as sexual slaves who are there to satisfy the fantasies and lust of men. As a result, they are forced into a passive role making their pimps, traffickers and customers to assume dominance. This dominance comes with series of exploitations thereby violating the fundamental human rights of the women. In Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce stand at windows of Antwerp’s red-light district selling their bodies to men in order to make enough money. They live like slaves to Madam in Belgium and Dele in Nigeria. Joyce reveals this in her monologue: “We’re not happy here. None of us is. We work hard to make somebody else rich. Madam treats us like animals” (290). Unfortunately, all the women have been shipped to Europe with fake identities hence they are branded “persona non grata” (182) illegal aliens, faceless, voiceless, vulnerable and prone to exploitation. Therefore “silence and total obedience” (120) is demanded of them; they are to be seen but not heard. Unigwe describes prostitutes as “Unmourned, unloved, unknown” (39). Thus, at Sisi’s death, Madam goes about her normal business. For her, “Sisi’s death is nothing more than a temporary discomfort. They had watched her eat a hearty breakfast, toast and eggs chewed with gusto and washed down with a huge mug of tea, and thought her appetite, her calm,

tactless” (39). Madam’s reaction upsets Efe, Ama and Joyce. They were only able to reveal their true identities and family histories when Sisi is murdered.

Nneoma in Adimora Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked*, becomes passive when she discovers that she has been trafficked. She discloses how her fundamental human rights (freedom of movement and her dignity) were infringed upon and she has no say in the matter. According to her Madam dollar who is her trafficker loves Money. “She owns us and the man, whom we learnt to call Captain, is her bodyguard. She keeps us prisoner in her flat. Life is hell in Rome we are always walking the night, selling sex to Italian men and foreigners” (128-129).

Undoubtedly, the exploitation of the women prostitutes is best projected in the amount of money slammed on them by their pimps. In *On Black Sisters’ Street*, Dele makes it clear to the women that they will remain his slaves until they pay him a sum of thirty thousand Euros each, which is the cost of bringing them to Europe. Therefore, when they arrive in Europe, their passports get confiscated until their debt is defrayed via a monthly payment. At the time of Sisi’s murder, she has been in Antwerp for eight months. Efe has spent almost seven years and hopes to be disenthralled within two years. In other words, by the time Efe attains freedom, she would have spent nine of her productive years serving Dele and sleeping with uncountable number of men on daily basis. Ama has spent almost six years in servitude. Joyce is the only prostitute with lesser time of servitude as Polycarp, her Nigerian lover, pays a significant part of her debt. In *Trafficked* by Adimora Ezeigbo, Efe has already spent six years in servitude before she escapes to verona and Nneoma has spent six years in servitude. Madadm Dollar and Baron do not give her any money to help her pay off her debt quickly. They even take the extra money some generous customers give her. She later escapes from Baron and is afterwards assisted by some sympathetic Nigerians in London until she is arrested and deported back to Nigeria.

Exploitation of the women in the two novels is also expressed in the commodification of their bodies in Europe. Although prostitution is not totally uncommon in most societies, the dissipation of the act and the debasement of the prostitutes totally strip them of their dignity. In Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, the women in Vingerlingstraat are displayed in show glasses as objects "strutting in sexy lingerie, Lacy bras and lacy thongs to attract customers" (178). In their half-nude state, the sex workers are displayed like articles of trade at windows or booths with "blinking red and black neon lights" (237) for their male customers who come to purchase them temporarily. Madam teaches them some trade secrets. She says "As long as he's king. His wish is your command and you do what he wants you to, no complaints. Make him forget that he is paying for the tenderness that you are showing him" (275). To mesmerize her customers, Sisi, learned to pose on heels, smile, pout, "rap at the window, hitting her ring hard against the glass on slow days to attract stragglers. She learned to twirl to help them make up their minds" (237). When "business was good, Sisi did an average of fifteen men" (260) but worse days she "had only two customers" (259). The customers move from window to window trying to "make up their minds to close a sale" (178). The object that is admired, bought and sold is the female body.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's portrayal of the commodification of Nneoma and Efe in *Trafficked* is no less touching. Nneoma and the other girls are seen as commodities to be bought and sold at will by Madam Dollar and Baron. The girls are abused physically and sexually by their owners. Madam Dollar insists on "dressing her girls in revealing clothes so as to ensnare customers" (267). When they resist being slept with, they are brutalized by the thugs. Nneoma reveals that she is often assaulted by Captain because she is stubborn and brings the least amount of money home. Sometimes refuses to cooperate with the customers, especially when they demand positions she finds "despicable or when they refuse to use a condom or make one of the other nasty demands..."

when I am difficult the men beat me and throw me out of their cars or kick me out of wherever they have taken me – sometimes a car park or a field or public garden” (129).

Since Nneoma is not bringing home more money, like other girls, Madam Dollar sells her to Baron, the pimp. Baron takes her to London and continues the exploitation thereby violating her fundamental human rights. He locks her up in his apartment, brings in men to have sex with her, rapes and beats her. Locking Nneoma up shows that pimps want to keep their victims in perpetual slavery to be making money for them. In such situations the victims according to Odinye (2018:47) “are mandated to sell sex as negotiated by their traffickers without considering their state of mind or choice of men”. Raping her is not also surprising because violence in form of rape in prostitution is inevitable. Dworkin (1995:239) asserts that “The relationship of prostitution to rape is simple and direct: whatever can be stolen can be sold. This means that women were both stolen and sold; and when practices were codified into laws women were defined as sexual chattel. Women are still basically viewed as sexual chattel-socially, legally, culturally, and in practice”. Prostitution itself is a form of sexualized male violence. Rape, assaults, verbal abuse etc. are the inherent characteristic or qualities.

Efe also shares her own excruciating experience to Nneoma in the hands of Madam Gold, the ‘vicious’ Nigerian woman. According to her, “She used us shamelessly, made us walk the streets every night... 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” (99-100). This shows that Madam Gold is callous and makes no distinction between business and human dignity. She is only interested in enriching herself to the detriment of her girls.

## **Conclusion**

Unigwe and Adimora-Ezeigbo through their female protagonists in *On Black Sisters’ Street* and *Trafficked* respectively portray that

prostitution is sexual exploitation and a vehicle of oppression which subjugates and dehumanizes women robbing them of their dignity and fundamental human rights. Thus, women who are forced into prostitution become sexual slaves; commodities to be bought and sold at will because they lack agency. This situation therefore makes them passive. Some Nigerian women as a result of socio-economic crisis such as poverty, unemployment, socio-economic crisis, peer association, lack of education become desperate to leave their country but fall prey to traffickers who coerce them into prostitution. They are therefore victims of circumstances who have unfortunately fallen prey to the snares of heartless traffickers and avaricious agencies that specialize in trafficking and prostitution. Their intention is to use their victims to make money for themselves thereby denying the women rights over their own bodies. Interestingly, the female protagonists in the two novels try to rewrite their past by challenging their oppressors. For instance, Efe in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, challenges Baron, who is formerly Nneoma's pimp in London. This shows a desire for social change ensuring he gets arrested for the crimes he commits against women. In Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, Sisi's attempt to liberate herself from prostitution results in her death. Although her white lover, Luc is ready to pay off her debt to Dele, the agents of patriarchy will not have that as it may lead to revolts by others. To serve as a deterrent to other prostitutes, she is murdered. Though, her triumph comes only in death, one sees her motivation to reclaim her dignity and fundamental rights as a human being by rejecting male exploitation and subjugation. It is pertinent to say therefore that the men and women should celebrate modernity by cooperating with each other to make the society a better place. The Nigerian government should create jobs so as to alleviate poverty, arrests any procurer or trafficker, create sensitization programmes that can educate not only women but also parents and family members on the dangers of prostitution.

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