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NEO-SLAVERY AND SERVITUDE: THE PLIGHT OF THE AFRICAN
WOMAN IN THREE SELECTED NIGERIAN NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

African women today face one form of neo-slavery or another in the diaspora. Colonial encounter in Africa brought about slave trade; the idea of selling able bodied men and women into slavery by their kinsmen in exchange for gifts from the white men. These young Africans were transported as slaves to work for the white men in their farms. Slave trade became abolished for good. In the African space today, a new form of slavery has emerged which compels Africans into servitude. African writers today explore the thematic concern of neo-slavery in their oeuvre. It is against this backdrop that this paper studies Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*, and Aire Oboh's *Branded Fugitives* as novels that portray neo-slavery and servitude in the present dispensation as a result of colonial encounter in Africa. This study adopts the postcolonial and reader response approaches to literary studies. It interrogates the deliberate sale of African young women into sex slavery which is one of the manifestations of neo-slavery. The essay discovers that traffickers sell these young girls into neo-slavery and subject them to total servitude in order to make economic gains of them.

Keywords: Neo-slavery, neo-colonialism, servitude, migration, sex slavery, human trafficking.

Introduction

Nigeria experienced the pains of colonialism when Europe scrambled for Africa. Post-independence struggles in Africa, and more especially in Nigeria has been a hydra headed story of diverse experiences which include the good, the bad and the ugly. The worst hit area has been the socio-political, and economic situation in Nigeria which has made the political structure very unstable with different political problems and inefficiency on the part of government. The economic situation in Nigeria has dwindled to the point that the deplorable living condition of the majority of Nigerian citizenry is becoming alarming. The bad economy of Nigeria has meted out untold hardship and generated problems of unemployment, insecurity of lives, properties and job. These myriad of

problems have pushed many Nigerians and other Africans into seeking ways to improve their lives within Africa and outside the shores of Africa, like in Europe and America. Both the learned and untutored seek means of migrating to other places in search of greener pastures to enable them meet up with the expectations and needs of life.

Even after colonialism, European powers still have a stronghold over the economy of their former colonies in different ways which they exercise in different but subtle ways. Some of the multinational companies have the base of production and other investments in Africa which yield gross capital in their former colonies. Their efficiency in business go a long way to determine the economic and developmental growth of the nations. The interplay of their economic collaboration with their former colonies contribute to the enhancement of the European economic strength. The European societies also create job opening for the best Nigerian brains to migrate to their countries to partner with them to build stronger sectors of capital human development. That is the new version of colonialism.

Neo-colonialism gave birth to migration, neo-slavery, servitude and its attendant problems. Slavery has been a social phenomenon for centuries now on world landscape. It started when Europe felt the need to bring in able bodied men and women to help them work on their plantations and assist them in their domestic spaces. To them the people to do that were those they considered to be of inferior race to them. In the 15th Century the hunt for slaves started when the Portuguese came to Africa. Africans were captured, sold into slavery and forcefully taken to Europe and America to serve the Europeans and Americans in diverse ways but most importantly to aid them and make life easier for them; some worked in the farms for agricultural development, and some worked in their homes as domestic servants to help alleviate the burden of chores, and guard their homes for them. Adi (2012) observes that, from the middle of the 15th Century, Africa entered into a unique relationship with Europe that led to the devastation and depopulation of Africa, but contributed to their wealth and development of Europe. From then until the end of the 19th Century Europeans began to establish a trade for African captives. This initiated the transatlantic slave trade then but slave trade thrives today in a new form.

Slavery at its earliest times were aided by fellow Africans who exchanged their kinsmen and even sold them in exchange for a few things they felt allured to the things brought by the Europeans. Some local administrators who could not contend with the dominating presence and powers of the Europeans succumbed to their demands by selling fellow Africans to them. These Africans were subjected to very inhuman treatment while transporting them to Europe and America by sea that led to the death of many captured slaves. To avert resistance and escape from them they were bound together in chains and forcefully dragged. These factors defined the racial injustice that Africans received and still receive in the European countries. They see Africans as slaves and people of a lower race.

Today, many Nigerians voluntarily migrate to Europe, America, Asia and other African countries in search of greener pasture. Many go in search of jobs, others run away to settle in the new places for better lives, especially running away from insecurity that has besieged many African countries. There is the brain drain syndrome and there is the "japa" syndrome - a word used to describe the sudden migration of many Africans and their families to Europe in search of ways to better their lives. The women folk in Nigeria are the most affected because they are the victims of most human trafficking business. Those who engage in human trafficking prefer young women because they are attractive, more lucrative and easier to be used and controlled. Their bodies become easily commoditized. They easily convince them, take them abroad and compel them to engage in prostitution and sex trade in order to pay back money spent in migrating them to Europe. Young women are also easy prey to those hunting human beings to market. Many Nigerian women are involved in the business of trafficking of young women to Europe and it appears to be a lucrative business to them.

They have their network on ground in Nigeria, those who help to lure the girls by advertising for a job in Nigeria. They have the middle persons who travel with these and disappear once on destination after handing over to the owner of the network. This essay examines the place of neo-slavery in the lives of some young Nigerian ladies who found themselves entangled in the web of slavery in this post-modern age of the 21st century even after slavery had been formally abolished virtually in all the countries of the world over two hundred years ago. This essay interrogates the lives of these women as captured by Nigerian novelists who have in their novels brought to limelight the evil of trafficking on human beings in Nigeria as a career, and those that thrive in it for economic gains.

Definition of Terms

Slavery defines a state of forced servitude, subjugation and lack of freedom in totality. Colonialism brought about slavery. Neocolonialism is the current impactful presence of former colonial powers in their former colonies directly or indirectly - in the areas of politics, governance, economic domination and control and sociocultural developments - is neocolonialism. Neocolonialism is modern colonialism. Ebeh & Aleke (2019:57), aver that the expression "neo-colonialism, for the most part, speaks of activities and impacts of colonialist in a given postcolonial society." Neocolonialism brought about neo-slavery. It is the economic, cultural and political domination of a European colony by the former powers. Neocolonialism gave birth to neo-slavery; it is a new way of enslaving blacks and taking into servitude without a single room for freedom. Ndiokwere (1998:247) explains that

Neo-slavery or slave trade in a new garb - neocolonialism and neo-nazism in the history of black people for survival and development today - cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. Neo-slavery is a by-product of the search for greener pastures....Slavery is assuming new postures and names. But this time it is not the whites who are importing slaves from Africa to work for them in their plantations and factories. Africans themselves - young and old, men and women, highly educated and abysmally illiterate - are offering themselves to anyone who cares in Europe, America, and Asia! Perhaps the only difference is that these "new African slaves" get a salary, however miniscule.

Ndiokwere sees the recent mass migration to Europe and America to be in the service of Europeans doing all manner of jobs as a kind of servitude. Part of neo-slavery is when migrants take up jobs that do not befit their current status. Ndiokwere (1998:249) further highlights that "it is not just remnants, ruins, or ashes or slavery that remain today. Slavery is here with us in new garb. Africans themselves are voluntarily selling themselves into slavery."

Servitude describes the state of being a slave to someone or something. It is slavery in totality; the process of keeping one subjugated without freedom of expression, desire or choice. It is usually done intentional by a superior authority or by someone who feels indebted to by another lower than him or her. Servitude manifests in subjection and exploitation by the superior on the inferior.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the postcolonial and reader response approaches to literary studies in undertaking this study. Postcolonial approach in literature places a work of literature in the context of its post-colonial background, in other words, it interrogates the presence of the tenets of colonialism in the work. Postcolonial study is interested in investigating the work against the background of the colonial antecedents. Barry (1995) explains that postcolonial studies undermine the Universalist claims by liberal humanists that literature is timeless and universal, but projects the view that cultural, social regional and national differences and experiences mark off works of literature especially those from the former colonies of Europe. Abrams and Harpham (2012:306) support the views of Barry by acknowledging that postcolonial studies are interested in "the critical analysis of the history, culture

and literature, and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, and France, and other European imperial powers.”

Ashcroft, Griffins and Tiffin (1989:1) highlight that “more than three-quarters of the living people in the world today have their lives shaped by the experiences of colonialism. It is easy to see how important this has been in the political and economic spheres, but its general influence on the perceptual frameworks of contemporary people is often evident.” Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing, and through other arts.... The fact remains that colonialism introduced a number of institutions in Africa and they have continued to thrive. Ocan, Okumu and Sekiwu (2022) believe that postcolonial literary theory has offered apt critical examinations of the different forces in society and how these forces influence societal expectations, norms, and values. Postcolonial theories emerged as a response to the excesses of colonialism and globalization or capitalism in the world. Postcolonial studies are based on the main aspects of colonialism and its pervasive effects which have persisted even after the end of colonial rule.

Reader-response criticism is the appreciation and interpretation of a literary artefact based on what the reader gleans from the book before him or her. It is the inherent meaning in the work without raising issues not expressed by the author. Abrams and Harpham (2012:330) extrapolate that

reader-response does not designate any one critical theory, but rather a focus on the process of reading a literary text that is shared by many of the critical modes....Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception that a text embodies an archived set of meanings, and focus instead on the ongoing mental operations and responses of readers as their eyes follow a text on the page before them.

Reader-response reads and objectively draws meaning from the content of the work expressed through character, subject matter and thematic implications available in the text. It is against this backdrop that this essay looks at these three selected novels as emanating from a former colony of British Empire and as a texts with ontological meaning based on their content and themes.

Methodology

This is purely a qualitative study which gathered its data from the narrative line and actions manifested in the three Nigerian novels. It examines the subject matter of neo-colonialism and servitude in creative literature with particular interest in the feminine folk as portrayed in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbos *Trafficked*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* and Aire Oboh's *Branded Fugitives*. These Nigerian novelists explore the subject of human trafficking as a prevalent problem in postcolonial state of Nigeria with its evil and negative impact on the lives of the African woman who today are victims of modern day slavery.

Review of Literature

The idea and process of trading on human beings for economic gains direct or indirect material gain is considered as human trafficking. According to Ocum, Okumu, and Sekiwe (2022: 196) Human Trafficking and exploitation are a form of human right violation that has become rampant in Africa. It is perceived as a modern form of slavery which impinges on the general wellbeing of young girls and boys.,,, Human trafficking is the biggest and fastest means by which people are exploited and forced into modern day slavery. Neo-slavery is the type of slavery prevalent in our society today and it is modern day slavery. Modern day slavery manifests in many different forms, especially with regard to people being compelled to engage in paid labour that is outside the confines of what they desired or expected. It manifests in the form of human trafficking, prostitution, physical bondage, forced labour, child trafficking, and debt bondage. Many people today especially youths find themselves caught within spaces of slavery without knowing what to do and others seeking ways to free themselves. Many people in the course of searching for better jobs abroad end up surrendering their future and freedom

to those who enslave them, and get them into a huge debt bondage with claims of sponsoring them to Europe. It becomes the easiest way to enslave them and subject them into debt bondage, sex slave, drug trafficking and unhealthy attachment.

African creative writers have in their different works of literature tried to recreate current issues pertaining to neo-slavery, prostitution, human trafficking and drug abuse in their different works. Migration has been a dominant issue in 21st African literature. African migrant literature explores the lives of Africans in the diaspora. Some concentrate on the lives of African writers who are in the diaspora - in Europe and America - and the quantity of creative works they have written on the African experiences of migration. Some other writers explore the predicament of Africans in search of greener pasture and their challenges. In the first group we find Nigerian writers like Tanure Ojaide, Tess Onwueme, Chimamanda Adichie, Akwaeke Emezi, Jude Dibia and others. There are African writers who live partly in Nigeria and spend some time abroad, they explore the lives of Africans here and there concentrating on the evils of human trafficking and prostitution; in this category are Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, Chika Unigwe and others.

It is our focus in this essay to examine three African novels on human trafficking, debt bondage and forced prostitution as modern day forms of slavery in three novels of Nigerian authors. These novels are *Trafficked* by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, *On Black Sisters Street* by Chika Unigwe and *Branded Fugitives* by Aire Oboh. These Nigerian novelists narrate in the different novels the subject matter of human trafficking, the problems that emanate from it and the predicament of the Nigerian women. These three novels have similar story line on their protagonists who are all female and all share similar experiences but different end points for the protagonists. The dominant themes derivable include the evils of human trafficking, the drivers of human trafficking, the challenge of debt bondage, forced prostitution and the efforts towards freedom and its consequences. All the girls have similar experiences but they ended up differently as a result of the opportunities available to them and their individual efforts at freedom.

Trafficked by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo

Adimora-Ezeigbo in this novel spells out the evils of human exploitation and deceit on fellow citizens. She explores the African women's dream and quest for migration and the consequent neo-slavery and servitude. The novel narrates the story of Nneoma a young Igbo woman who just finished her Teacher Training Programme and is in search of a good paying job. She is a young girl already betrothed to a young man, Offomata, but envisioned to secure a good job and earn well. Nneoma is encouraged to apply for a teaching job in Europe by a friend who has also been invited to apply. Both apply to enable them travel out of the country and earn enough money to maintain themselves and support their poor families. Nneoma and her friend apply for the job and through the agency of unknown persons they are sponsored to Europe by five Nigerians – the man and woman that guided them and handed them over to another man and woman who take them to Italy and handed them over to Madam Dollar who bought them for business. It is at this point that Nneoma realizes that she has been lured away and trafficked. Nneoma laments her predicament thus:

We are six women between the ages of seventeen and twenty. They tell us we will have plenty of time to pay back our debts to the agency when we start earning money. While in Lagos we relate with just two people, Eddie and Maria. Everything seems normal. They joke with us as if we were their younger sisters. I am so happy and I thank my chi. I am already thinking of the money I'll make in the United Kingdom. The only thing that worries me is that they tell us that the consequences will be severe if we disregard the terms of the agreement, disobey them or cut links without settling our debts... At the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, we are met by a man and woman who travel with us instead of Eddie and Maria. I am anxious about this but not unduly. They explain that Eddie and Maria are their Nigerian contacts. For the first time

we hear we will get to Italy before travelling to Britain.... In Italy I discover I am trafficked. I have no say in the matter. There is a woman called Madam Dollar – nothing comes in between her and money. She owns us and the man, whom we learn to call Captain, is her body guard. 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. I hate Madam Dollar. As soon we arrive, she sells my friend. I have not set eyes on her since. (128)

What she never expected is what dawns on her. Her travelling papers are taken away from her and seized by Madam Dollar who tells her that she is bound to her; she is expected to walk the streets of Europe selling sex to all who desire her till she pays the last kobo spent on bringing her to Europe. By this act Madam Dollar showcases the levels and versions of slavery – bound to Madam in ownership, bound to Madam as a result of debt owed and the climax is the compulsion to engage in prostitution and remit money gained through that to her.

Nneoma recounts her years of woes and predicament as she slaves for Madam Dollar. Many a time she is maltreated and abused by Captain for Madam Dollar, for not complying with the sexual demands of those who want sex from her. Though Nneoma engages in this trade, she maintains her dignity by not engaging in types of sexual activities that are dehumanizing and degrading to her and this earns more abuse from Madam Dollar and Captain. Nneoma further laments thus:

So I walk the streets of Rome for Madam Dollar for three years and still she claims I have not repaid my debt. There is no hope of escape, I do not speak Italian. I know no one in the city.... So I remain with Madam Dollar, biding my time, dreaming of freedom. Then help seems to come in the person of a man called Baron. He takes me and two other girls to London and says he has rescued us. In actual fact, he has bought me from Madam Dollar, thus cancelling my debt.... Baron tells us his mother is Nigerian and his father English... (*Trafficked* 132).

The new acquisition of Nneoma by Baron begins another form of sex slavery. This time he sends the other two girls in the brothels and keeps Nneoma at home and brings in men who pay him to sleep with her. It is while Nneoma is with Baron that she succeeds in escaping from him and later is captured by the Police as an illegal migrant and alongside other Nigerians girls with similar predicament, they are deported to Nigeria and are taken in for rehabilitation and reintegration into the society. Nneoma suffered terrible abuse within the years she was enslaved by Madam Dollar and Baron. While in Italy she is a slave, forcefully taken to a destination that she does not know anything about; she is in debt bondage to Madam Dollar and she pays by engaging in prostitution to pay her. She cannot get other descent jobs because she has no say and freedom to explore her potentials. Her travel documents are not with her and there is a language barrier; she cannot interact freely to explore other options that may be available to her. After her escape from Baron she faces the crises of displacement, trauma and inability to move on because she has no papers to justify her stay in London.

All the girls who find themselves as victims of trafficking and sex slavery in particular have the same or very similar stories to tell about their experiences and predicament. Efe, the young lady who is among the young girls repatriated to Nigeria for migration offences or illegal travel to Europe. Efe the young lady who is returned to Nigeria with Nneoma narrates her own predicament in this manner:

I was born in Benin where my parents had lived all their lives....my family was poor, it was a struggle to put meals on the table....One day I saw an advertisement on a newspaper while I was on a visit to my cousin in Lagos.... I responded to the advertisement without my cousin's knowledge....Some were rejected, but I was selected. None of the men who were interviewed was taken... Any way before long, all the girls – ten of us – were given a travel schedule. We took an oath to work for the agency until we had paid our debts. They claimed they had spent a lot of money getting our passports and tickets.

To cut a long story short. We were taken to Italy and ended up in Palermo. It was terrible. I was sold to a woman, Madam Gold a Nigerian. She was vicious. She used us shamelessly, made us walk the streets every night. (*Trafficked* 99)

The business of human trafficking is the new slave trade; the network is strong and very well knit with middlemen who are stationed at every point to make it formidable. It is slavery that is done subtly at the grassroots to lure young women and once lured the chain is economically and psychologically locked to avert escape and resistance. Efe also ends up the way the Nneoma does before they are deported to Nigeria

Madam Gold sold me to a pimp white man –after four years of slaving for her. I worked for my new owner for two years before I escaped. Then I fled to Verona and teamed up with a prostitute. I moved there and worked indecently for about another year because I wanted to have some money to return home. I would have returned home straight after my escape. Then the police arrested me and I was deported. (*Trafficked* 100)

These two ladies in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* are representative of the woes of neo-slavery and servitude that erodes the world today. The two Madams – Dollar and Gold – are archetypes of the slave traders in the modern sense who want nothing more than which they earn by assaulting human worth and dignity. They too are products of such system because they do not do any other job but ripe off on the innocence of naïve young girls who are oblivious of what life outside Nigeria offers.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo through the depiction of Nneoma and Efe has launched the campaign that in spite of the youths' desperation to travel to Europe and America for greener passage, the African woman still has her dignity. Nneoma on her realization of her predicament yields to the demands of the business but with some reservations and dignity; she detects the way she offers her services to the sex buyers. She puts up some resistance to the brutal attacks of Captain. At the house of Baron in London she also puts up some level of resistance before she eventually escapes. Efe also escapes from her oppressor before she eventually finds her way to Nigeria. Adimora_Ezeigbo also announces hope for the trafficked African woman, with the strength and vision of Oasis in rehabilitating the girls and reintegrating them. The Trafficked woman needs to be revived through counselling, entrepreneurship and empowerment.

***On Black Sisters Street* by Chika Unigwe**

Chika Unigwe in *Black Sisters Street* brings it closer again the evil of neo-slavery and servitude by exposing the lives of three Nigerian ladies and one Sudanese young lady who finds herself in Nigeria. These four ladies are trafficked by the same agent Dele Senghor and sent to Antwerp in Germany to one sex slave dealer in Europe just known as Madam. In very clear terms Unigwe exposes the factors that lead these women into the lives they find themselves. She does not mince words in exposing the in human businesses run by vicious Nigerian men and women in order to survive. They specialize on the modern human cargo for their selfish gains. These four women at different times are lured individually and separately by the same man Dele who interacts with them under different circumstances in Lagos. He gets them taken to Belgium to the same dealer for forced prostitution, debt bondage and servitude to the woman, and Dele by extension. These four women found themselves in Antwerp as roommates sharing apartment under the ownership and guidance of Madam. They live together and do the same job for Madam and that is engaging in sleeping with men earning money from which they send 500 Euros to Dele who claims ownership and sponsorship to Europe, and to Madam who has right of ownership of them by providing accommodation and throwing in her business guidance. Madam welcomes them on arrival at the airport with the help of a pimp living with and working for her. She provides the right attire for the job and helps secure a stand and space for displaying oneself to intending buyers of sex. On arrival she encourages them to take up asylum condition as a status to ensure that the person does not fall victim to authorities' harassment.

Sissy, Ama, Efe and Joyce are the four ladies who found themselves trafficked to Belgium by Dele to Madam and they are compelled to engage in prostitution and paying back the debt of their travel. The author of the novel in the novel devotes different chapters of the novel individually to these different women whose names form the title of the chapters in order to give an in depth account of their lives of slavery and servitude and the circumstances that necessitate their migration. These ladies live together in one room apartment. Their lives are traumatized by the undefined debt bondage, lack of freedom to engage in the work at their own time and disposition, the unorganized and visionless lives they live without the slightest thought of the end of their servitude to Madam and Dele. The omniscient narrator who takes the reader into the lives of the women observes:

The women are not sure what they are to each other. Thrown together by conspiracy of fate and a loud man called Dele. They are bound in a sort of obstructive friendship, comfortable with what little they knew of each other, asking no questions unless prompted, sharing deep laughter and music in their sitting room making light of the life of which has taught them to make the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs, dissecting the men who come to them,... (*On Black Sisters Street* 26)

Sissy, whose real name is Chisom is an only daughter to a poor Igbo family that lives in Lagos, graduated from the university and could not secure a good job after many years. She gets in contact with Dele in a hair salon and voluntarily offers herself for migration through Dele's network. She travels to Antwerp and engages in prostitution under Madam's guide. She sends money to her family from time to time believing that with time she will buy her freedom and get established one day. She is the only lady among the four women who attempts to walk out of the life of sex slavery after few by getting into relationship with a white man and hoping to escape through that means with the help of the Police. Little does she know that the eyes of Madam is all over monitoring every move she makes. She is later murdered brutally by Segun, the unassuming near imbecile, a man who doubles as driver, and domestic worker to Madam. Segun traces her to Luc's house lures her out on a brief outing and kills her with a heavy metal discarding her body carefully without any trace. Sissy's death throws the lives of the other three women into fear, uncertainty and plunge them into a state of utter insecurity.

A slave is not spared on the exhibition of any act of insubordination, rebellion or revolt. Such acts of disobedience attracts a death sentence. This is why slaves are usually bound in chains while transporting them, and are guarded by very stringent laws before the abolition of slavery. Today, in the era of modern slavery, the victims are bound by oaths taken before deities as it is the case with Nneoma and Efe; and then their travel documents are dispossessed of them knowing that they cannot undertake any meaningful movement without their travel papers.

Efe offers to follow Dele's choice because of her predicament. She lost her mother very early and her father could not give adequate attention to his children. Efe is left with the responsibility of feigning for her siblings; she falls prey to a married man who exploits her sexually and offering her money and gifts. The moment she gets impregnated he dumps her and she suffers to have the child. When it becomes obvious that she could no longer sustain her baby and her siblings opts to go Dele's way.

Ama, one of the girls is a victim child sexual abuse. She is sexually abused at the age of eight by her step father who claims to be a pastor. Her mother had her out of wedlock and brings her to her new marriage. When she exposes the menace of her stepfather, he denies it and her mother does not believe. She is thrown out of the house by her father and she goes to Lagos to live with her aunt who sells. It is there that she meets Dele and falls into his snare of sending girls abroad. Ama is the most rascally of the girls and she is also traumatized, this is why she drinks a lot and smokes a lot as a way to transpose her problems to a realm of numbness. She is one among the women who may end up being another Madam by engaging in the business of slavery because of the way she reasons.

One remarkable difference about Dele's human traffic business is that he directly or indirectly prepares the minds of his victims by taking them into confidence of the kind of work that they would engage in when they get to Europe, which distinguishes the other local traders in human cargo. Dele Segun has his way with girls and young women. He approaches them and convinces them of the kind of work they are to do abroad. The women also had the opportunity to seek other ways to improve their lives rather than the travel option yet they succumb to prostitution which they think could be an easy way to make money since it requires just offering the body. Unfortunately, the ladies are bound to Dele by oath and agreement. These human traffic agents raise the pay back money so high that it becomes a life debt thereby keeping victims in perpetual servitude.

The last of the girls is Joyce, a Sudanese, whose real name is Alek, she is an orphan who is helpless in an IDP camp. She comes to the IDP camp in Sudan after she lost her family. She is attracted to a young Nigerian Igbo soldier on mission, who takes her in with the hope of marrying her. He brings her with him to Nigeria after the military mission in Sudan. After years of living with her could not marry her because of family pressure of unknown identity, he takes her to Dele the human cargo explorer to find her a way to take her to Europe to work. Joyce ends up in Madam's business venture in Belgium.

Unigwe exposes the life that awaits young Nigerian women who opt to migrate to Europe through agency through her novel. In realistic trends she brings to the fore the secrets of travel agencies who put up job adverts on their bill boards but do a different business. In Dele Senghor, she creates the prototype and the secrets behind the life of comfort such agencies and their agents exhibit and advertise. Their comfort and affluence stems from the money they reap off young women who are in servitude to them via modern day slavery. Life in Antwerp for the young women is unbearable; life of utter slavery and servitude without the end in view. She convinces her audience that the young women in the quagmire are already trapped and doomed forever, except there is an immediate and speedy intervention by the authorities, the death of Sisi is representative of the consequences of revolt, resistance or insubordination. The women in Europe are under the grips of the owners, except they work for the stipulated number of years they cannot buy their freedom. At the expiration of the designated number of years the young women are getting aged and totally spent without hope of a better future. They are traumatized to the point of hopelessness.

Branded Fugitives by Aire Oboh

Aire Oboh brings to the fore the desperate ambition of youths to travel to Europe for greener pasture. The novel *Branded Fugitives* is a saga featuring the lives of many youths in Benin who travel in and out of Nigeria for businesses that afford them enough money for extravagant lives. These youths engage in businesses, make money and return to Benin for a show off, and through this means attract more youths to join them in such lives. The author mounts the campaign of interrogating the jobs of youths who travel overseas to return to Nigeria to publicly showcase their wealth by openly spending it to put other youths on the track of following them to know how to get rich quick. Such is what befalls the protagonist of the novel, who undertakes to travel abroad to work and earn money to support herself and her poor family.

Ivie and her mother are so much attracted to know to how to become rich like her childhood friend Itohan and her cousin Tessy who come back from Europe to their home town in Benin. They come home to showcase how much money they have made and how such money has transformed the economic situation of their families. Iya Tessy who is Ivie's aunty keeps talking to her sister Oghogho to allow her daughter Ivie to join her mates to Europe to work, to enhance the family's economic situation. Iya Tessy who used to be a petty trader has suddenly become a very rich woman, who drives cars and owns lands, all to the courtesy of her daughter Tessy, Ivie's cousin. Ivie is lured into the net of those who want to travel to Europe by all these. She is introduced to Shakepeare by her friend Itohan. Ivie throws away her ardent belief of her Pentecostal assembly DOWA Church, resigns the

little secretarial job she does for her boss, rejects the marriage to her, and joins the youths who travel to Europe in search of money. Oboh exposes the youths' engagement in illegal businesses and jobs to make money. Ivie who in the course of the preparation encounters so many problems and challenges yet she is not deterred. Ivie asks Itohan what kind of job she will do, and she replies thus:

'Ivie you ask questions like a silly child. You're a big girl, aren't you? You simply stroll out when night comes. You won't need to learn that, even very dull girls catch up easily. Since you're beautiful...oh. You don't know what god has given you ... believe me, men will be mad after you. White guys, rich and handsome, very nice people. Sometimes, you would return home in the morning wishing you had gone out with a bigger handbag. (*Branded Fugitives* 184)

Shakespeare who promises to support her travel could no longer when she suddenly loses touch with him. The European embassy denies her Visa and she is trapped between seeking alternative help or going back to Benin. She opts to seek further help from her friend Itohan. Itohan introduces Ivie to a woman who deals on human cargo. The woman in order to compensate a business partner, Alabama over a favour succumbs to handing Ivie to him on special request. Ivie falls into the hands of a former friend of her brother who turned an enemy after an attempt to rape her in the past. The guy sees it as an opportunity to get back at Ivie, he abuses Ivie sexually to a degrading stage. In spite of all these Ivie continues with her push to travel to Europe. Eventually she goes to Europe to discover that it is a life of extreme forced sex slave and debt bondage. Ivie is ruthlessly abused by a gang of men with dogs and she falls into a delirious state that results to her death. After her death her family is contacted and her body is brought home back to Benin by Society for the Liberation of Sex Slaves (SOLISS) an NGO body in charge of rescuing trafficked girls. Not only that Ivie dies, other youths who are involved in sex slavery, human and drug trafficking in the novel also suffer one mishap or the other and even die in the course. Ivie dies of unspecified sexual abuse and disease, Alabama and Itohan die of sexually transmitted disease and the woman who sells the girls into slavery is arrested.

Branded Fugitives is Aire Oboh' message to youths to be wary of human trafficking of their desperation to travel to Europe in search of greener pasture. He uses the medium of his novel to extend a kind moral teaching on youthful exuberance, unhealthy peer influence and desperate ambitious trends. He warns on the need for youths to uphold moral integrity. He also emphasizes the biblical injunction and warning on sowing and reaping, walking with God and keeping faith in God. Ivie who deceitfully abandons her church members and their pieces of advice to her on the need to keep in God, dies disgracefully. Oghogho, Ivie's mother, who could not guide her daughter into the right choice of life's affair and discipline becomes the greatest loser. She loses her husband as a result domestic crises, her son loses years of study at the university for cult activities and related offences, and also loses Ivie the daughter that would have given her a better future.

Oboh in the same vein, raises cries of attention on the lives of migrant youths who travel to Europe and return to their home town to spend money in very flamboyant ways to attract and lure other youths to their lifestyle. Oboh raises the question on the need to investigate the source of such income and the reason for its wastage. He warns that the sudden desire and imitation of such lives may lead to doom. Oboh uses the medium of his novel to promote the law of sowing and reaping. He brings all that derailed to retribution; evil caught up with all the youths in one shady business or the other. Alabama is caught up by his contracting HIV, after all his sexual escapades and assault on girls on the way to Europe. Itohan dies of a disease while on sex trade in Italy, Shakespeare is arrested for illegal drug offenses and Madam the trafficker is arrested by the police. Other youths who indulge in one evil or the other at home are also punished for their sins. A good example is Ivie's brother, Osahon, who is expelled from the University in his final year as a Law student for cult involvement and activities. Oghogho, Ivie's mother turns out as the biggest loser, she lost everything: her husband and daughter.

The three authors depict that this business thrives because there are many men and woman who are deeply involved in the business who run it as a career business. The likes of Eddie and Maria in *Trafficked* are the local negotiators who lure the youths and give the impression that they are pursuing a worthwhile course. When Nneoma and her friend encounters them they did not suspect anything because they have been very friendly with them. The two people a man and woman that travel with them are the travel agents who takes over from the Nigeria. Then on getting to Italy the barons of the business emerge in the person of Madam Dollar and Captain who put the girls on the street and monitor what they do. They pick quarrels with them when they do not return the expected. Captain beats Nneoma when she refuses unprotected sex and styles of copulation that are not acceptable to her. To keep her perfectly under control devoid of rebellion and conspiracy Madam Dollar separates from her from her friend by selling her friend off. The turning of the girls into marketable commodities is suggestive of the fact they may never be allowed to be free except they fight their way through violently or treacherously. When Madam Dollar and her partner, Captain, feel they have had enough of her, Nneoma is sold to Baron who takes her to London. In *Black sisters Street*, Dele is the sole negotiator and recruiter of the young girls. He convinces them and enslaves them. While Madam in Belgium is the centre Trafficker who owns the girls and dictates what they do and how they do it. The authors of *Trafficked* and *On Black Sisters Street* used the tool of character and setting to expose the evils of modern slavery from the Nigerian and International perspectives.

Oboh through the depiction of many youthful characters exposes the secret behind peoples' wealth and success. As the youths come to Benin to throw parties and drive round town in flashy cars all that the people believe is that they go to Europe and make money, without a single thought on what they do to acquire such wealth. At the last point of no more options, Itohan opens up to Ivie and said:

Perhaps, you didn't know. We have a business we run, that's why we're still around. We help the girls whom we trust', especially those who we know very well. We help them to travel to Italy, Belgium, Spain. All the good places, depending on our calculations. Sometimes we demand a fifty thousand naira deposit and two reliable guarantors before we accept or take them in. it involves a lot of money, you know. (184)

Ivie discovers that her friends are involved in Trafficking and sex slavery and after due consideration walks into it. These young men women engage in taking women to Italy to sell sex to willing men both black and white. Itohan tries to convince Ivie to join the gang.

These three Nigerian novelists through the creation of traffickers and trafficked in their novels depict in full terms the evils of trading on human beings and the strong network they wield in Nigeria, Africa and Europe. The setting of these narratives authenticate that it is sex selling, and it is a business patronized a great deal by men in the western world especially in Europe. It appears to thrive more in Italy than London. Nneoma and Efe work in Italy without being hunted down but their escape from their owners in London exposed them to the authorities that come after them and see to their deportation.

The image of the 'Madam' becomes a recurrent motif in the three novels signifying the Trafficker, the oppressor and exploiter. The nature and modus operandi of the 'Madam' are the same in the three novels which is representative of the evil of neo-slavery and the human cargo business. The personality of all the human agents in the human business are the same and the network very strong. Though a business that thrives in secrecy but it enjoys the protection of some agencies of the security. The operation of these business is not hidden but the protection and obscurity it enjoys are shielded by unknown authorities. With the recurrent exposure of the business, its mode of operation, especially in luring naïve youths away awareness is being created among the Nigerian populace.

In all these cases of displacement from ones country to another, there are the two concepts of expectations and reality. The young migrate hoping to have it better but they end up getting totally

disappointed. Ezeigbo (2023635) notes that the four African women who leave Africa for Europe due to socio-economic imperatives revealing the manifest contrast between their hope of Europe and what they found it on arrival.

Conclusion

Modern slavery and its companion – servitude is thriving in our country Nigeria, Africa and in Europe in the guise of human trafficking. Human trafficking is a business thriving among a class of people who have clinched on the human cargo business as a means of survival in spite of the ongoing campaign in the globe against the violation of human rights of freedom. Colonialism brought about slavery, but the slavery today cannot be said to be managed by the colonial master but by our own men and women. Africans now enslave Africans in the diaspora. The European society may encourage modern day slavery, nevertheless it is nourished and fanned into flame by Africans themselves. Neo-slavery is a problem to be combated from within and not the other way round.

Many youths have lost their lives in the hands of these heartless traffickers who have turned able bodied young women into slaves through debt bondage and servitude. Nigerian writers especially novelists both in Nigeria and the diaspora have continued to explore these issues and to mount campaigns on how to dismantle and end the evil of neo-slavery and servitude in Nigeria. Through the medium of their novels these writers create awareness and mount campaign on how to abolish modern day slavery. The message is for young women to explore their potentials and seek ways to survive meaningfully without the thought of using their bodies to make money. It is also a rider to proper investigation of every vision towards migration to any other part of the world. Any migration vision that attracts the sponsor of any agency without proper designation of work to do should be subjected to investigation and proper analysis to avoid being a victim to the human cargo business, neo-slavery or modern day slavery.

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