

TRANSCENDENCE IN AKACHI EZEIGBO'S *TRAFFICKED*

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Abstract

Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo is one of Nigeria's eminent contemporary novelists and scholars. She has written many distinguished works that cover a variety of socio-economic and political themes. *Trafficked* is a novel which depicts Ezeigbo's sense of responsibility and moral awareness as she speaks out against the injustices faced by women who are hoodwinked into the sex industry. This article will depict transcendence in the representation of female characters in *Trafficked* (2008) as they battle the struggles of socio-political and economic oppression, poverty and desperation. Their experience of transcendence is very much like the womanist metamorphosis of the female individual, which leads them to empowerment to carve new lives for themselves despite their past encounters. Through Ezeigbo's representation of female characters, we are not only given a more nuanced understanding of the trauma within the intricate business of modern slavery, but also deeper appreciation of female strength and bravery. This article will show how the novelist and scholar in Ezeigbo combines creative writing and literary criticism in *Trafficked*, using literature as a social discourse to comment on issues surrounding modern slavery.

Keywords: Trafficked, trafficking, Womanist, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, Africa, Nigeria

The works of Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo indeed reflect her skills as a teacher and eminent novelist-scholar. A Professor of English at the University of Lagos, her oeuvre places her in various genres as theorist, novelist, playwright, children's literature author and poet. Her long, successful career as a scholar mirrors Achebe's commentary that the novelist is teacher and the Igbo proverb 'It's morning yet on creation day'. Her commitment is to use literature as a means to understand human and national development. Her dedication is like that of other African literary artists like Achebe, Armah, Aidoo, Ngugi, Emecheta, Head, Awoonor, Amadi, Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, Clark, Osundare, Ojaide, Soyinka, Sutherland, Rotimi and Osofisan among others. Among her more distinguished works that reveal her skill as a female novelist are *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2001), *Trafficked* (2008) and *Roses and Bullets* (2011). These novels cover an array of focus, ranging from the Biafran civil war to concerns of contemporary postcolonial Nigeria. Despite the diverse nature of her works, one focus remains fundamental to Ezeigbo's works, which is placing women as central characters and deconstructing structures of power which place them in the periphery. This article will depict transcendence in the representation of female characters in *Trafficked* as they battle the struggles of socio-political and economic oppression, poverty and desperation.

In her article "Traditional Women's Institutions in Igbo Society: Implication for the Igbo Female Writer", Akachi Ezeigbo emphasizes the importance of the female novelist "[assisting] her society to come to moral awareness" (p. 163). In her novel *Trafficked*,

we find her sense of responsibility evident as she speaks out against injustices faced by women who are hoodwinked into the sex industry. Sex trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery which use women as commodities in the sex trade. The international definition for trafficking adopted by the United Nations in 2000 is “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used” (Waugh, p.3). Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* focuses on the exploitation of Nigerian women through the characters of Nneoma and Efe, the ways in which they are deceived as well as the abuse they experience in their position of vulnerability. *Trafficked* unfolds for us some of the modes operandi of the ‘business’ of modern slavery, its fraud, deception, force and abuse of power.

The horrors of sex trafficking is present day society’s social issue. It is also a contemporary, ubiquitous disease in Nigerian society which needs to be combated, requiring attention and involvement. The trafficking of Nigerian women points back to Nigeria’s socio-economic and political structures particularly the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which were implemented during the Babangida regime, a reflection of multi-layered, self-serving, hypocritical governance that increased Nigeria’s international debt, overvaluation of the naira, internal corruption and decline into poverty. Nigeria’s neo-liberal policies pushed the common Nigerian into poverty-stricken conditions, pointing towards the failed optimism of the initial years of independence. Most were left desperate and displaced. These extreme states of destitution created avenues for modern “slave traders [to] sniff out the most despondent individuals” (Kara, p. 8). Statistics reveal that between 1990-2005, “40,000 to 50,000 Nigerian women have become victims of trafficking [sexual exploitation, forced labour, the removal of organs or servitude]” (Carling, p. 45). While this estimated figure does not give us an accurate number of trafficked victims given the highly regulated and complex nature of this organized crime, it discloses to us the profuse involvement of Nigerian women in this business of sex trafficking. It is these socio-economic concerns that Ezeigbo addresses in her text *Trafficked* (2008), providing a literary and analytical exposition of the business of modern slavery, paying particular attention to its effects on Nigerian women. A slim, readable text of twenty-nine chapters, Ezeigbo unfolds through the development of each chapter, the poverty-stricken conditions of families in Nigeria, Nigerian women who leave Nigeria in hope of a better life and finally the exposition of modern slavery.

In her inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Lagos in 2008, Professor Akachi Ezeigbo herself states that literature not only functions as “the greatest tool in the representation of reality”, but is also instrumental for the development of society (p. 10). In this way, literature is essential in describing aspects of society such as “social conflicts, class struggle and the human condition” (p. 10). The function of the writer, like Ezeigbo, is then to educate and instruct readers, “correcting them and redirecting

[them]" from "the evils in their societies" (pp. 10-11). While there may be writers elsewhere who have not seen themselves as social critics, Wole Soyinka asserted at an African-Scandinavian Writer's Conference in Stockholm in 1967, "the artist has always functioned in African societies as the record of mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his time" (Ezeigbo 1990, p. 21). Therefore, traditional African art whether in form or oral literature and modern forms of African art and literature alike have a social function. While Ezeigbo's vast oeuvres cover diverse aspects of Nigerian life and society, her novel *Trafficked* focuses on social justice. This text is her "voice of vision in [her] time" (p. 21). Ezeigbo uses *Trafficked* as a "fictional [trajectory] of justice", creating awareness of the plight of women who become victims of the sex trafficking industry (Nadaswaran, p. 382). Literary books such as Ezeigbo's reveal the "symbiotic relationship forged with the marriage of literary criticism and creative writing - the two branches of the literary enterprise" (Ezeigbo 1990, p. 23). Hence, a creative text like *Trafficked* uses literature as a social discourse to comment on issues surrounding modern slavery.

For this analysis, we will locate our discourse within the framework of womanist theory expounded by Chiwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Alice Walker. There are varying theoretical structures in which we can place Akachi Ezeigbo's novel. A combination of theories such as African feminism, stiwanism (from STIWA: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), Africana womanism and so on ultimately conglomerate towards various scholarly stances, perspectives which elucidate the African female struggle for self-articulation, womanhood and empowerment, a process which we hope will be progressively clarified and elucidated. As such, using Ogunyemi and Walker's womanist theory provides a fundamental understanding on the development or metamorphosis of the female character that transcends into a place of empowerment while previously experiencing imminent entrapment. While Alice Walker's womanist theory draws on the African-American experience, we find her conceptualization useful in providing a substantive definition of female development and self-definition.

Akachi Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* gives us a nuanced understanding of the business of sex trafficking, highlighting the intricate movements of transnational criminal networks, the horrors faced by women who are trafficked and their transcendence into empowerment seen in their successful attempts of escape into freedom as well as their renegotiation back into society. Sex slavery provides a lucrative business because in most cases the acquisition of the supply labor is free as victims are often kidnapped women forced to work in the trade. In *Trafficked*, Ezeigbo discloses the experiences of two women who narrate similar experiences of being hoodwinked into dubious job opportunities and economic freedom. Ezeigbo uses fiction as a platform to demonstrate a perceptible understanding on the efficient, sophisticated business of modern slavery, an indication of her creative finesse as a distinguished writer. Nneoma, in the text articulates the lengths traffickers go to convince their victims of their legitimacy. This is evident in Nneoma's instance that despite being an educated graduate, a qualified teacher, she herself falls for these deceptions, "they [showed] us pictures of the schools where we'll be teaching and [gave] us appointment letters signed by people with English names" (Ezeigbo, p.127). On the other hand, Ezeigbo's Efe in the text reiterates how "an advertisement in a newspaper" led her into becoming a victim of trafficking. Sociological research correlates to Nneoma and Efe's experiences, informing us how deceit in the form of a

"false offer of a job, travel or other income-generating opportunity" are means used for "the purpose of acquiring a slave" (Kara, p. 7).

In revealing the circumstances that led to their trafficking, Ezeigbo also uses her fiction as a mode to intimately disclose the torture faced by victims of trafficking in the hands of their exploiters. Victims are often drugged, beaten and raped to ensure a submissive state that erases any thought of freedom, "the more broken a slave's spirit was, the more acceptable she was of the life of a slave" (Kara, p. 11). Once they are trapped in the trade, the stories of survivors correlate as they share how they are sold from one pimp or broker to another, ensuring their perpetual enslavement. Slavery and slavehood thus become their new life and reality. Efe narrates:

One day, I saw an advertisement in a news paper while I was on a visit to my cousin in Lagos. They asked young men and women who wished to work abroad to come to a certain address to be interviewed... Quite a number of people were interviewed, some were rejected but I was selected, but none of the men who were interviewed was taken. We took an oath to work for the agency until we had paid our debts. We were taken to Italy and ended up in Palermo. I was sold to a woman called Madam Gold, a Nigerian. She was vicious. 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 year before I escaped. (pp.99-100)

The first person narrative utilized by Ezeigbo exposes the sufferings of a trafficked woman. The diction 'vicious' used to describe her owner followed by the word 'shamelessly' reveals the constant state of humiliation and degradation trafficked women are subjected too. The reemphasis of Efe's 'slaving' is reiterated through her acknowledgement of her commoditization seen in her pimp being her 'owner'. 'Ownership' or being owned and the threat of being re-trafficked are realities faced by sex slaves, "forced to return to the same conditions" repeatedly, powerless, shackled to the lives determined by their traffickers (Kara, p. 16). The relationship of Efe and Nneoma who meet at a rehabilitation centre function as double's who reemphasize the realities victims face. Nneoma's fate is no different than Efe. She reveals to Efe,

I am completely devastated by the life I'm forced to live: hit the street, waiting for customers, winter, spring, summer, and autumn; comeback at dawn, eat and sleep till it all begins again at nightfall ... I'm often assaulted by Captain because I'm stubborn and bring the least amount of money home ... so I walk the streets of Rome for Madam Dollar for three years ... There is no hope for escape ... [Baron] has bought me from Madam Dollar ... Instead of putting me on the street, he brings men to the flat. Baron is a sadist. He rapes me and beats me ... Baron locks me up in the flat, and does not allow me to go out except when he takes me with him. (Ezeigbo, pp. 129-132)

Nneoma's narrative is equally heart-wrenching as her experience of being raped and beaten by Baron is capitalized on by Ezeigbo to reveal inhumane existence within modern slavery. The immanent state of entrapment is embodied in the locked space of a flat Nneoma inhabits under her captor Baron. Her curbed freedom unless accompanied by her pimp unveils the actuality of her exploitation. The constant, repetitive nature of her nightmarish existence every day or through the seasons of the year illustrates the continuous shame and degradation in the lives of trafficked women. Efe and Nneoma's

narratives are illustrative of the horrendous exploitation and suffering experienced by trafficked slaves.

While Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* saliently discloses the immanent nature of the business of sex trafficking, its intricate networks and entrapment of women, the artistic quality of her work reverberates in the transcendent quality invoked through the representation of her female characters that defy their immobilized state. Unlike most victims of sex trafficking that escape but are too afraid to testify against their captors for fear of 'juju' (local Nigerian black magic) and imminent death, Ezeigbo chooses to emphasize on the spiritual, womanist transcendence depicted in characters that escape into freedom, experience catharsis through communal sharing which leads them towards inadvertently standing up to their oppressors. Chikewenye Okonjo Ogunyemi describes how a female character develops womanist characteristics "after a traumatic event such as menarche or after an epiphany or as a result of the experience of racism, rape, death in the family, or sudden responsibility. Through coping with the experience she moves creatively beyond the self to that concern for the needs of others characteristics of adult womanists" (Ogunyemi, p. 28). Alice Walker's theorises womanism as "courageous or willful ... grown-up ... Responsible. In Charge. Serious ... Loves the Spirit ... Loves herself. Regardless" (Walker, p. xi-xii). Ezeigbo's Nneoma and Efe embody similar womanist characteristics and experiences when they are trafficked. In fact, the reason these two female characters attempted to find jobs overseas was to secure income that would provide better lives for their families. Their fight to regain freedom from their captors affirms their womanist representations.

The transcendence of female characters in the text is very much like the womanist 'metamorphosis' of the female individual. The various stages serve to further highlight and develop the female character. The first form of transcendence emphasized in the text is seen in Nneoma and Efe's escape from their captors. Placed against the numbers of women who are trafficked, very few manage to survive, exploited as slaves. This is due to many reasons ranging from their already beaten down spirits, their fear of their traffickers and the tightly watched environment that does not permit escape. Thus, in representing this fraction of women who manage to escape, Ezeigbo represents female characters that refuse to be subjugated, endowing them a space in fiction, unlike that of their realities as sex slaves, the opportunity to regain their identities. Efe and Nneoma's narratives become embodiments for women who remain victims of trafficking, functioning as figures of freedom. Nneoma takes her opportunity to escape when Baron, her trafficker, takes her shopping. She describes "[Baron] stops for a second to buy a newspaper and as soon as he turns his back, I open the door gently and get out. I do not look back until I have disappeared round the corner of the next street. I run and run and run until I'm out of breath" (pp. 133-4). Ezeigbo's depiction of Nneoma's escape highlights the intensity and dangerous risks involved in escaping her captor and yet she takes the opportunity she gets regardless of Baron's threat that "he would cut off her leg and one of her breast if she attempted to run away. He would make sure no one looked at her or desired her again after he had dealt with her. She didn't think it was an idle threat. She lived in fear of him" (p. 167). Despite fear of Baron's threat, Nneoma still chooses to run. Her refusal to remain incarcerated by Baron is a representation of her womanist transcendence, her decision to keep fighting despite all odds. The metaphor of 'running' used by Ezeigbo to describe Nneoma's escape is as much as about the female character running away from her captor but also running

towards her freedom, future and identity. Despite being beaten, raped and broken, the trafficked female characters in the novel reveal a refusal to remain in captivity but strive towards mobility.

When trafficked women are deported home, their emotional state often has to deal with brokenness, hurt, fear and not being accepted by family members. They not only carry the shame of their experience but often feel stigmatized and are treated with contempt. Coupled with their horrendous experience and terrible 'homecoming' reception, trafficked victims are often left emotionally debilitated. An example of this is described by Ezeigbo at the beginning of her text when "she [Nneoma], the young woman, and some fifteen girls – without passports, without any identification – were the last to disembark. They had been stowed away at the back of the plane during the journey ... She and fifteen humiliated young women shuffled out of the aircraft, past the crew who stood aside, watching them as if they were lepers or slaves disembarking from a slave ship. She looked up and saw the disdainful expression on the face of one of the stewardesses, and looked away quickly" (pp. 2-4). The reference to trafficked deportees as lepers and slaves depict the reprehensible yet judgmental manner in which society viewed these women. Words such as 'humiliated', 'stowed', 'shuffled' and 'looked away' give us an idea of their lack of agency and loss of confidence. Nneoma goes on to explain that "she had left with so much hope and aspiration; now she was returning in shame and hopelessness" (p.12). This is clearly depicted in Nneoma and Efe's friendship when they meet in the Oasis Centre as they struggle to achieve emotional wholeness. Nneoma's experience with Baron hampers her emotional freedom. True to a womanist, Efe encourages Nneoma to share their individual experiences, a "support of spiritually grounded self-expression within the context of commonweal" (Philips, p. xxxvii). Efe states that

I want to be your friend in the real sense, to carry some o your burden, if you allow me and also get you to share some of mine, if you are willing. Nneoma, we are all broken inside. Look, why don't we just tell each other what happened to us? Perhaps finding our voices will help us heal?. (p. 97)

The transcendence from focusing on the physical to emphasizing spiritual well being helps female characters redevelop their wholesome identities. The act of verbalizing their pain and finding emotional release makes communal sharing a method that leads to empowerment. At the end of their sharing, Nneoma's declaration "I feel cleansed. My body feels light. Efe, thank you for listening to my story ... I think I've actually been healed" (pp. 135-6). This 'cleansing' which Nneoma experiences is cathartic and leads her towards empowerment. The ending of that section of the text is particularly telling as both Nneoma and Efe burst out laughing. Despite their horrendous experiences, the ability to see beyond their past experiences allows their self-expression to emerge, "Nneoma threw her head back and gurgled with laughter. She laughed so hard that tears ran down her face. Efe also laughed, sure that Nneoma's tears were not caused by sorrow this time" (p. 136). This 'purging' which Ezeigbo adequately describes helps the reader not only to connect with these victims sufferings as they narrate their story, but it also allows us to engage with their process of restoration.

The climax of the novel which depicts the female character's total transcendence into empowerment is seen when they encounter the threat of being re-trafficked. The fear of being re-trafficked is a very real actuality for Nigerian women who return to

Nigeria. Often, traffickers trick women into conjugal relationships, only to retraffic them into the trade. Efe meets Baron, Nneoma's former trafficker who renames himself Fyneface, and is hoodwinked into a relationship with him. When Efe discovers that Fyneface may be Baron, she chooses to confront him in a bar, "I'll expose him" (p. 167). The courage depicted by the female in confronting their traffickers reveal their intentions of exposing him as a "cheat and a heartless exploiter" (p. 136). They also reflect the spirit of womanist strength and bravery, refusing to be silenced. Ezeigbo uses her fiction to voice the silence surrounding the crime of sex trafficking. In allowing her characters to confront a trafficker, Ezeigbo herself uses her text as a vehicle to express rage against these heinous crimes. Efe confronts Baron,

Is your name truly Fyneface, or is it Baron? For a moment, Baron's face twitched and fear filled his eyes. He thought Efe might be a detective or a member of the Secret Security Service ... But how could she have discovered his identity as Baron? ... Who was she? A spy using the salon as a camouflage for her real profession? ... You're Baron and a bloody trafficker ... This man is a cheat and an exploiter. He is here to traffick women abroad ... Baron knew he had to make a fast exit. (pp. 186-7)

Ezeigbo's skill is clearly delineated, by her ability to intersperse Efe's confrontation with Baron's stream of thought, fuelled by his fear. By juxtaposing these two characters, Ezeigbo portrays the ability of representing female characters no longer at the periphery placing them instead in central depictions to articulate as well as assert their individualities. Efe's rage represents collective rage against the business of modern slavery. This final stage of transcendence of confronting traffickers completes the character's metamorphosis and healing. The text ending with Efe married and Nneoma successfully securing a place in university showcases their full development into womanists that carve new lives for themselves despite their past encounters, moving forward after the trauma experienced in their lives as trafficked women.

An interesting element used in the text which is noteworthy of attention in discussing transcendence is the character of Dr. Chindo Okehi, an academic, a senior lecturer in the Department of Science Education of the University of Lagos, Nigeria. She becomes Nneoma's confidante, a woman whom she leans to for support at the university. Ezeigbo's rendition of Nneoma successfully gaining an entrance into University depicts the female character's successful transcendence into a womanist character. Even when Nneoma is fired by her employer Chief Amadi when he discovers she was a deported prostitute (this incident happens at the end of the text, after her catharsis and 'purging'), Nneoma refuses to take on the stigmatization but instead looks towards her resolution of receiving an education at the University of Lagos, "the memory still rankled. But her reaction had been totally different this time. She had left with dignity ... She therefore asks herself ... was this a sign that she had matured or had become hardened (p. 282). Instead of allowing others to subjugate her by reminding her of her former debased experience, Nneoma sees Dr. Chindo Okehi as a source of inspiration and looks towards receiving her bachelor's degree as a means of moving forward with her life. Hence, Dr. Chindo Okehi represents all that Nneoma aspires to be - educated, confident and refined, symbolizing guidance and hope. Just as Efe gets married and moves on with her life, Ezeigbo suggests a similar avenue for Nneoma. Goal setting completes the process of transcendence, offering a tangible means of moving forward.

An expert, experienced reader cannot help but notice the resemblance of the character of Dr. Chindo Okehi with that of Akachi Ezeigbo herself. Nneoma describes Dr. Chindo Okehi as a woman who is tall, elegant and a brilliant academic for a woman in her forties. A good mother, she also exudes the same treatment to her students through her kindness, concern and sincerity for their welfare, "Dr Okehi did not belong to the class of lecturers who discussed their colleagues with students", but instead focuses on the needs of their students and the means by which they can offer assistance (p. 148). She comforts Nneoma and encourages her to reconstruct her identity physically as well as emotionally. An example of Dr. Chindo Okehi's concern is exhibited when she offers Nneoma lodging at her son's quarters so that she can save some money as she starts university. In my opinion, the character of the text (Dr. Chindo Okehi) and writer (Akachi Ezeigbo) cross over from reality to fiction and vice versa, merges to emphasize the role of novelist as teacher. Through a creative retelling of authentic (sociological) events, Ezeigbo inserts herself into the text, to reemphasize the role of literature as a tool to express social justice and the importance of the role of the novelist in commenting on her socio-economic environment. Okehi's character as an academic and Ezeigbo as an academic scholar- novelist calls attention to the role of the African woman writer in presenting and commenting on the position of women in Africa. Therefore, Ezeigbo successfully uses her female characters to convey her messages, no longer willing to remain silent in watching the denigration of women through trafficking. The character of Dr. Chido Okehi and Akachi Ezeigbo are indeed "kind" to women who have experienced trafficking (p. 308). As Dr. Chido Okehi offers Nneoma accommodation to help her get on her feet in the text, Ezeigbo on the other hand offers *Trafficked* as a means to raise awareness and offer possibilities to women who have had their lives devastated by unscrupulous individuals.

A seminal work on African women writers by Minike Schipper *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America* states that the 'message' of the female writer is to address these points, "Who is speaking? Who is seeing? And Who is acting? ... Who is not speaking? Who has no right to speak? Who does not see? Whose view is not expressed? Who does not act? Who has been deprived of the right to act? Who is powerless to act, to take the initiative; who is forced to submit to the acts of others?" (15). Therefore, writing is meant to be a power tool, a tool that can be used to deconstruct structures of power and dominance in society. Through *Trafficked*, Ezeigbo addresses the 'silenced' voice of trafficked victims. Moreover, research on sex trafficking often uses a sociological methodology. Instead of a similar methodology, Ezeigbo successfully uses literature to address this modern, heinous crime committed on women.

Ebele Eko in *Changes in the Image of the African Woman: A Celebration* asserts that "African women writers have made all the difference to the image of African women. Their projection of women as protagonist, the preponderance of female related themes in their works, their concern for the psychological growth and liberation of women ... bring their work a personal commitment and sharper vision" (p. 218). In this text, Ezeigbo's engagement with the Nigerian woman's cause and revealing the intricacies involved in this abominable trade establishes not only her commitment and vision as a female writer but also her skills as a novelist and teacher. The trajectory of the commoditization of women is a battle everyone should be engaged in, in order to put an end to this form

of modern slavery. Eziegbo joins her companions in Nigeria and abroad in sounding the clarion call to end the dehumanization of human beings.

Note

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