

Get Rich Quick Syndrome and Nigerian Literature in the 21st Century: an Examination of Ameh's *Sweet Taste of Shame*

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Abstract

According to the United Nations organization for Education, Science and culture (UNESCO), Nigeria is one of the leading African countries in human trafficking. Towards the end of the twentieth century, human traffickers engaged in this crime for the purposes of supplying persons for prostitution, begging, domestic servitude and other sundry under-paid and exploited labour. But a new dimension to human trafficking reared its ugly head in the 21st century. Young women and girls are recruited into "baby factories" under false pretext that they would be given jobs or safe abortions. Thus, they are confined to the so-called baby factories and forced to give birth for sale. Some of the victims are impregnated by men specifically employed for such purposes. The babies are then sold for domestic or international adoptions, rituals, slave labour or sexual exploitation. This is the shameful and dehumanizing crime explored in Ameh's "Sweet Taste of Shame". This paper shall discuss the moral depravity of Nigerians as dramatized by four teenage girls who have been forced into producing children for a morally bankrupt syndicate spearheaded by a couple (Doctor and Cash madam). The law represented by the Divisional Police Officer is also an accomplice and signifies the dimension of the heinous crime and the need for action to transform our society and restore its cherished values.

Keywords: Get rich quick, Syndrome, Nigeria Literature, 21st Century, Ameh.

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed erosion of our cherished African moral values and graciousness. In the past, the norm was that youths learnt the virtues of respect, courtesy, decency, propriety, honesty and righteousness from a tender age and had enough discipline to hold these values through to adulthood. These values are no longer evident in the Nigerian society of the 21st century. There is palpable decline in the morality of the people and selfishness, greed, poverty and avarice of individuals seem to be the root causes. The consequences are that Nigeria, the "giant" of Africa is fast losing its value systems due to all these vices.

Nigeria has an extremely negative reputation internationally due to the vices stated above. The country is regarded as a nation of very religious people (Christians/Muslims/Others) but despite this, immorality, corruption, and Godless materialism has reached an astronomical level that all who wish the nation well must be worried at this turn of events. In fact, Nigeria needs cultural renaissance. A critical look at Nigerian society will show that the honoured African culture chastity and moral rectitude have been jettisoned while prostitution and promiscuity, materialism, greed, selfishness, avarice and many other vices have become fashionable (1) This paper attempts an examination of baby factories, a very serious crime, an off-shoot of human trafficking dramatized by Ameh's *Sweet Taste of Shame*.

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II. What is “Baby Factory”?

Since this phenomenon is an off-shoot of human trafficking, it is pertinent to briefly explain what human trafficking is; human trafficking can be regarded as trafficking in persons for the purposes of supplying persons for prostitution, begging, domestic servitude and other sundry underpaid and exploited labour. Human trafficking is widespread in Nigeria and the country has been negatively noted for it. According to the latest trafficking in persons report of the U.S Department of state, Nigeria continues to be a source, transit and destination country for victims of different forms of forced labour and sex trafficking (2). But in recent years, Nigeria has become notorious for “baby factories” and “baby harvesting”. There is no legal definition for this heinous crime but journalist use these terms to describe criminal activities in Nigeria involving restrictions of persons’ movement against such person’s will, forced impregnations, sale of babies and illegal adoptions (3). Based on media reports, “baby factories” thrive in the south-east and south west of Nigeria.

Since 2006, numerous cases of “baby factories” in Nigeria have been reported by media and news facts have emerged about the phenomenon. According to these reports women and girls are lured into such factories through deception and exploitation of their vulnerability. Traffickers usually approach these victims with false promises of jobs or safe abortions. There are at least two factors that make these victims vulnerable: being children (teenagers) (4) or being pregnant out of wedlock, which carries a social stigma in Nigeria (5). Girls and women are locked up at facilities used as “baby factories” allowing their traffickers to control and hold them until they give birth to babies that are subsequently sold to third parties. Those victims who are not pregnant upon their arrival at the baby factory” are impregnated by men specially employed for such purposes. Their babies are mostly sold for domestic or international adoptions, rituals, slave labour or sexual exploitation.

There have been series of raids on baby factories by the police since May 2008 in Enugu, Aba, Imo, Anambra, Lagos and Ogun States. The most recent as reported by Sunday Sun newspaper of June 21, 2015 was the one unearthed by the police in Etiti Amankuro area of Enugu State where nine pregnant young girls, among them four teenagers were rescued from baby traders in a private residence.

Causes of this Crime

Some of the root causes of baby factories may be those that facilitate any other form of human trafficking such as poverty and high unemployment rates, low level of education and literacy, corruption and lack of information on human trafficking. For example, the majority of Nigerian population lives below poverty line in less than one dollar per day. (6)

There are also particular factors that may contribute to exploitation of women and children in baby factories, such as gender discrimination and social stigma in Nigerian society. For example in traditional Nigerian society parents regard girls as a poor investment and are unwilling to send them to schools, finding them more suitable for domestic work. This in turn limits girls’ future opportunities to find a well-paid job and provide for themselves. This ensures a steady supply of women and teenage girls for operators of baby factories.

Social stigmas that contribute to the existence of baby factories in Nigeria are those against teenage pregnancies, pregnancies out of wedlock, couples infertility and legal adoptions. The first two help to ensure that there is an abundant supply of women, teenage girls and their new-borns at such baby factories. The last two help to promote demand for such babies for their biological infants to avoid cultural and societal disapproval. (8)

III. Who is Eliagwu Ameh?

Eliagwu Ameh is a creative writer, social analyst and development communicator. He was born in Kano in May 28, 1982 but he has his roots in Ogbadibo Local Government Area of Benue State. He has a first class BA (Hons) Degree in Philosophy from the University of Zimbabwe and an MA in Development Communication from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

He has worked as a journalist, information officer and senior legislative aide. He is also the coordinator of Theatre for Concerted Change (T4CC), a non-profit organization geared towards enhancing grassroots development through participatory communication and development –oriented theatre. His publications include plays, poems, short stories, social commentaries and academic essays. His short story “Vagina Protest”, won the 2010 Centre for Human Development/Ford Foundation Writing Competition (press category). His play, “Climate of Change”, emerged the second runner – up of the 2012 Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Drama Prize.

IV. Sweet Taste of Shame

This is a play that exposes the existence of a thriving pregnant for-sale trade. It examines the exploitation of teenagers (Ene, First Girl, Second Girl and Third Girl), who have been lured into Doctor and Cash Madam's baby factory. The girls are given the impression that they are being assisted to have safe delivery in an orphanage.

Statement of Problem / Purpose of Study

The trend of trafficking in Nigeria is becoming worrisome. In recent years, traffickers in Nigeria have also started exploiting their victims for baby harvesting. This is made possible because Nigerians have got their norms and values eroded. What we have now is love of money at the expense of culture. Africans were noted for love of children, but unfortunately these days, some Nigerians are ready to part with their children for paltry sum of money. Our purpose in this paper is to examine how Ameh, acting as the conscience of the society tries to sensitize Nigerians to the ugly trend of the spread of baby factories in Nigeria in his play *Sweet Taste of Shame*.

Methodology

We shall use ethical theory and social constructivism in the examination of Ameh's attempt to explore the tyranny of baby factories in Nigeria. What is ethical theory? Ethical theory is a branch of moral philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong.

What is at stake in moral criticism is the centrality of both ethics and literary art to human beings' lives as morally deliberate, socially embedded, imaginatively fertile and persistently emotional creatures who are capable, even if frequently unwillingly and clumsy about doing so, of submitting their moral deliberations, their social relations, their imaginative constructions, and their emotional impulses to rational inspection, intellectual analysis and ethical evaluations. Ethics refers to all the ways that people perform the essentially important social and moral taste of evaluating human beings' conduct as right or wrong. It lies at the centre of and derives from the nature and requirements of sociability itself. There are no cultures without arts and ethics (9).

The text *Sweet Taste of Shame* shall be examined based on the activities of the characters (Monday, Ene, Doctor, Cash Madam, First Girl, Second Girl, third Girl) against the ethical/moral expectation of the Nigerian society. All these would be done as a means of highlighting Ameh's intention of sensitizing the consciousness of Nigerians to the evil of baby factories so that they can participate actively in stamping out the predatory menace.

Critical Comments

The play points to what poverty, unemployment and ignorance can do to an innocent human being. It portrays baby factory as a flourishing business but which is degrading and criminal in nature. Its operators who are represented in this play, (Doctor and Cash madam), capitalize on the reproductive challenges and vulnerability of their victims. The operators of baby factories also exploit the sudden transition from childhood to adulthood which teenage pregnancy imposes on its victims. ENE, the daughter of Monday, a police officer is a typical example. She is abused by her father, Monday. The incest committed by Monday on this innocent and inexperienced girl pushes her into the baby factory by Doctor and his wife, Cash Madam. In the orphanage are three other girls (first girl, second girl and third girl). The abuse these four girls experience is not just physical but also emotional and psychological.

Another victim of failed state in the play is Emeka who after six years of graduation could not secure a job. After being employed as a laboratory technician by Doctor he was lured under oath into being the person who will help impregnate the girls in the baby factory. Also linked to this heinous crime is the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) who unfortunately is an accomplice in this trade. He is constantly settled by the syndicate and this gives Cash Madam the effrontery to boast that if she is taken to the police, she will leave the office and her accuser will be left behind bars. Cash Madam arrogantly warns Monday who attempts to gun her down.

.....take that gun off me before I call your boss, DPO knows about this business. I settle him every month to allow us to operate... (p.81)

The activities of Monday who commits incest against his daughter is ethically wrong and uncommon in the culture of Africans. He shows no remorse about it other than the shameless apology he renders at the end of the play:

.....i'm sorry, daddy's little girl, our eyes have seen too much of late... I can't ask you to forget what I've done to you.... I only ask that you forgive me....and know that daddy is sorry, very sorry (p.84)

The couples, Doctor and Cash Madam, who operate the baby factory have through their lust for wealth debase and devalue African women. This business in which the couple engages is not only unethical and criminal but also degrading. Their intention is to make quick money at the expense of young women who produce the babies that are articles of their trade.

The young women (ENE, and the three girls) who produce the babies that are articles of this trade as an economic survival technique are as short-sighted as they are morally bankrupt. They are giving away their soul, which is what those children are, for a paltry sum of money. It is unfortunate that most of these girls had realized the implication of their actions. For many, the trauma of their action may last a life-time and may be so destructive that they may never recover from it (10). Emeka, who serves as the machine that impregnates these girls is also a victim of a failed state where youth unemployment thrives. He is lured into doing this job through an oath he takes with the doctor. Unfortunately he cannot break this oath without some dangerous consequences. Sometimes these blood oaths are just a psychological maneuver.

In Act Two, Scene 4, the playwright brings in the use of social constructivism. The four vulnerable girls come together to struggle for their liberation like learners would do collaboratively in a classroom to solve problems. Ene spearheaded the struggle by rallying round the other three girls and urge them to plan an escape from the orphanage

.....we cannot continue like this my sisters. We have to design an ingenious escape plan. We study their movements, spot the loopholes and take advantage. (p.48) The girls decide to go on hunger strike which eventually yields a positive result. the confusion that follows brings in Monday who deals with Doctor and Cash Madam and liberates the girls. The resolve of the four girls to struggle for their freedom points to the fact that African women are no longer passive and no longer depend on men for their liberation from challenges.

Conclusion

We have examined Ameh's *Sweet Taste of Shame* as a play that makes a conscious effort to sensitize Nigerian to the existence of baby factories in the country and to the fact that the trade is criminal and degrading. The play also calls for concerted civil action against the dastardly trade of baby factory and a contribution to the struggle for a better society where the dignity of African womanhood is maintained.

Recommendations

Charity begins at home. Parents should realize that they are failing in their duties when they fail to educate their children adequately on the difference between right and wrong. They should enlighten their female children on the implications of unwanted pregnancies. The National Council of Women Society (NCWS) should take it as a top priority the education of its members that they owe the society a duty to stop this crime (baby factory) which is a debasement of womanhood. Operators of baby factories are patronized by desperate childless couples and ritual killers. The Attorney General of the Federation should take another look at our adoption laws and procedures with a view to making them practicable. Reputable NGO's and International Organizations should conduct comprehensive field research to gather information on destination countries for babies sold, the number of victims, the criminal groups involved in operation of baby factories and the purposes for which such babies are bought. Findings from the research will enable the country to know which type of legislation to adopt in tackling the menace. (11) The Nigerian police should set up a special squad in all states of the Federation to break up and uproot these baby selling syndicates wherever they may be.

Our prosecutors and judges should not take this crime as a moral issue, but a criminal one. Whenever any new baby factory is discovered, the media will be awashed with the news but unfortunately we are yet to see any serious trials and convictions of baby factory operators. No wonder, the operator (Cash Madam) in the text just examined boasts of her invincibility. Operators of baby factories are increasing on daily basis, because none of those apprehended has been severely punished. Until this is done the spread will not stop. Our law enforcement agencies particularly the police should stop collaborating with these baby factory operators. Currently, it seems the bug of get-rich-quick syndrome has eaten deep into the flesh of both baby factory operators and our law enforcement agents.

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