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Domination and Sexual Objectification: A Study of Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*

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Abstract

Literature is a mirror of society. This is because it reflects the human day to day experiences of people in their various phases of existence. In Nigeria, its patriarchal nature has created asymmetric gender roles that are marked by hierarchy and domination. This system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex provides material advantages that enable men to dominate women while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of women. As a result of their socio-economic conditions which infringe on their dreams and desire for a better life, some Nigerian women long for a change, especially with globalization. They become desperate to leave their country but fall prey to traffickers who coerce them into prostitution. Prostitution becomes a situation where men have reduced women to an image of being mere sexual objects. This paper therefore examines the domination and sexual objectification of women in prostitution using Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House.* The novel exposes the socio-economic conditions of Nigerian women and their harrowing experiences in Nigeria as prostitutes. The paper adopts radical feminist theory which sees the female body as a sexual object; consumable item that is for sale making men to

subordinate women. The research methodology is qualitative. The paper discovers that globalization, gender inequality and poverty render Nigerian women vulnerable to trafficking and prostitution. The paper conclude that the Nigerian government should create job opportunities so as to alleviate poverty through reformation and rehabilitation programs, public enlightenment, sports and cultural activities, arrests any procurer or trafficker, and introduce sex education in the curriculum of secondary schools and tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Sexual Objectification, Patriarchy, Prostitution, Radical Feminism, Globalization.

Introduction

The position of women in society in relation to men and the subordination, oppression and marginalization of women has continued to attract the attention of scholars, feminists and activists. In Nigerian patriarchal society, this system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex provides material advantages which enable men to dominate women while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of women. Thus, there is the commonality of the general belief system that the best place for a woman is in the 'Kitchen'. This trend has brought about tremendous misrepresentation of women right at the level of the family down to the circular society. Patriarchy justifies the marginalization of women in education, economy, labour market, politics, business, family, domestic matters and inheritance (Salaam, 2003). As a result of their socio-economic conditions which infringe on their dreams and desire for a better life, some Nigerian women, long for a change, especially with globalization. They become desperate to leave their country but fall prey to traffickers who coerce them into prostitution. Thus, the purported irrelevance associated with the status of women in society has merely reduced the average woman to an inferior commodity. Prostitution becomes a situation where men have reduced women to an image of mere sexual objects. This allows

men to unconscionably oppress and coerce women in order to satisfy their own fantasies.

According to Papadaki (2007, p.49), objectification is "treating a person, as a commodity or an object without regard to their personality or dignity". Objectification is when people are dehumanized and diminished by being treated as entities lacking thoughts and feelings (Wright & Tokunaga, 2015). When a woman is treated as a commodity or an object her personality and dignity are disregarded. In other words, objectification debases womanhood. Sexual objectification on the other hand, is "when a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions, are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instrument or regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, p.175). Apparently, a woman who is sexually objectified is treated as an object, with the primary purpose of being for the use and pleasure of others. It is assumed that sexual objectivity can lead to denial of subjectivity, which removes an individual's experience and feelings. When people are perceived as sex objects, they are not seen as fully human, deserving dignity and respect. Bartky (1990, p.26) opines that sexual objectification is the "tendency to value women solely on the basis of the utility of sexual parts or functions". Barry (1997, p.28) says that "degrading a person's humanity, reducing her into an object ... the object becomes a commodity for market exchange, like any other object on (sic) the market... for one's own sexual use is a violation of human rights".

This position of Nigerian women in society has attracted the attention of scholars, activists and feminists' writers of the 21st century. They have continued to shine their searchlight on these reoccurring issues in order to bring these situations to the public sphere for discussion and possible amelioration. In Adimora-Ezeigbo *Trafficked* (2008), she portrays how materialism has led traffickers into criminal acts that impede the progress of other

individuals. The novel showcases young Nigerian women, Nneoma and Efe, who are trafficked victims that have been deported from Europe. They left their home, in search of greener pastures to alleviate the poor state of their family but are trafficked into prostitution by their procurers. In abroad, as prostitutes they roam the street like slaves because they have no freedom. Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* (2010) and Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh* (2003), portray the debilitating and excruciating experiences of African women who become objects of pleasure after being trafficked to Europe. This not only incarcerates them but also dehumanizes their image as women. In Sanusi's *Eyo* (2009), the writer portrays not only the traffickers quest for wealth but also how poverty, laziness, a lack of parental care and cultural practices like the devaluation of women and girls in some African societies make women vulnerable to trafficking.

Consequently, sexual objectification can lead to negative psychological effects including eating disorders, depression and sexual dysfunction. The victims not only experience high levels of violence, like physical assaults, sexual assaults, verbal threats or abuse and psychological abuse but they are also at high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, HPV (Human Papilloma Virus), PID (pelvic inflammatory disease), sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), an increased risk for cervical cancer and psychosis. There are also the dangers of pregnancy and abortion.

Theoretical Framework

One theory that helps to better understand the domination and sexual objectification of women in prostitution is radical feminism. This is a branch of feminism that was formed during the second wave of feminism which started from the 1960s to the 1980s. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights are dominant issues, and much of the movement's energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex. Some key radical feminists are; Ti-

Grace Atkinson, Susan Brownmiller, Phyllis Chester, Corrine Grad Coleman, Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer, Carol Hanisch, Jill Johnson, Catherine Mackinnon, Kate Millett, Robin Morgan, Ellen Willis and Monique Wittig.

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

Radical feminism views prostitution and by extension the sex market as the ideal demonstration of women being subordinated and subjected to violence through the patriarchal demands of the market. Thus, radical feminists believe that prostitution is sexual exploitation and a vehicle of oppression where men and the male-dominated system oppress women and prostitution is just another way of keeping women down by perpetuating a system of gender inequality where men are permissive consumers of women. Radical feminists are of the view that prostitution should not be legalized in any capacity, and therefore should absolutely be banned.

One of the greatest concerns about prostitution from a radical stand-point is the conflation of the female body with a consumable item that it is for sale. This contributes to a system wherein women are regarded as objects and are therefore objectified. According to the radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, the sexual objectification of women by men is the primary mechanism of women's subordination: men regard women as suitable for sexual use and exercise socially sanctioned control over them so as to make them conform to men's view of them; in so doing, men make women into objects, wrongly harming them by denying them their humanity. In her essay, *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory*, radical feminist leader Catherine Mackinnon (1982, p.22) explores the idea of female sexuality as constructed solely via its relationship to men's sexuality: "A woman is a being who identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male". In other words, women's sexuality under patriarchy cannot be theirs but that which incites desire in men. The sex market which renders a woman's body a commodity is therefore incompatible with radical feminism. Some radical feminists argue that the sex market by breaking down the barrier between sexual activity against commercialization and production degrades the sexual autonomy women socially hold. The lack of autonomy in the sex market stems from the inhumane treatment sex workers often face, the social and economic power discrepancy between the consumers and providers of sexual services and content and the perpetuation of the subordination of women through the sex market's high demand.

Radical feminists claim patriarchy is the main source of women's oppression, positioning men as the dominant self and women as the submissive other. They claim that women are vulnerable to violence in a patriarchal society. This vulnerability to violence positions women as potential victims'. This theory sees the issue of the trafficking of women into prostitution as problematic because it

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

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

Women as sexual objects in Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*

Ifeanyi Ajaegbo is a Nigerian writer born in 1971, in Enugu State. He is a culture development expert and the executive director of the Center for Integrated Youth Development, an NGO working in the Niger Delta. He is also the founding secretary of the Society for Relevant Art and Culture (SORAC). His novel, *Sarah House* was shortlisted for the NLNG Literature Prize for 2012.Unigwe at the commentary section of the novel says that Ajaegbo in the novel "tackles a very serious, contemporary problem with empathy and a lightness of touch that ensures that a reader is never completely overwhelmed". The writer tackles contemporary socio-economic

issues in the 21st century Nigeria which is much of a developing country in which her political system has failed its citizens making its young women who are supposed to work for its greatness to seek for greener pastures, thereby making them victims of traffickers who coerce them into prostitution. This act makes the victims' bodies automatically, sexual objects.

In Ajaegbo's *Sarah House* the poor conditions and background of Nita the protagonist and Madam (owner of Sarah House) make them vulnerable victims of patriarchal oppression. Nita is from Opobo village. According to her "the oil companies only came to take what was beneath our soil, destroying our farms and fishing waters in the process and no one did anything about that" (38). The oil companies that caused the problem neglected the host communities. To make matters worse, the government invested the revenue coming from oil in non-oil producing areas. Soyinka (1989, p.12) opines that "this is no way to run a country. To keep Nigeria one, justice must be done to all. If Nigeria considers itself a part of the civilized world, it must show concern for its minorities and treat them fairly". Of course, this situation increased the rate of poverty and unemployment in that area because a lot of people lost their land and water and could not fish, plant, or cultivate their land. The situation makes her lover, Slim (who unknowing to her is an agent of sex trafficking) to take advantage of her. According to O'Connor and Healy (2006, p.4) "even though poverty is not only for women, they are the most vulnerable victims that traffickers target to drag them to sexual exploitation".

Slim adopts the technique of vagueness and impreciseness in his initial dialogue with his victims so that he can soften the harshness of his offers. Nita informs us that Slim "painted pictures of a new beginning in his tales of the city, tales of good schools after which people got well paying jobs. He talked about black people like us who got jobs from the oil companies" (38). In fact, he promises to

give her a life of glamour in the city if she works hard and his "words had created the life [she] believed in the life [she] wanted and not this hell" (31). Through saying too much about the peripheries without ever mentioning directly the heart of the matter, Slim wants to distract and hypnotize his prey. Thus, Nita wakes up one day and discovers herself in a world, very different from the opportunities that are promised to her by Slim. She finds out that Slim uses that tactic to lure naive girls like her under the pretense of loving them. Matti's reveals to her that, Slim said the same thing "to me...and to Dumi. And to Mary. To Ibiso. To Ibiwari" (20). Apparently, he drugs them before bringing them to Port Harcourt. Soon, she realizes that she has been adopted and automatically forced into prostitution without her consent.

Madam, at the age of fifteen was once a victim of patriarchal oppression because she came from a poor family. Her father is a carpenter in Benin City who has less than twenty thousand naira a month to feed eight children. Her mother is a petty trader who "peddled shrivelled fruits and limp vegetables from a makeshift stall by the roadside" (180). Madam's father is overjoyed when his brother offers to take his daughter back with him to Italy "where she would become a part of his family and get a good education" (181). Little did he know that his brother is a "procurer, a dealer who specialized in supplying young flesh to strip clubs and brothels" (182) and the life he promised his daughter is that of sex slavery specifically, prostitution. Madam's parents have their eyes fixed on the money and gift items that will be sent to them by their daughter and the respect they will get from the society. For them, in Italy as servant or prostitute she has a better chance of becoming like Uncle. Kambarami (1997) holds strongly to this patriarchal view when she says that the woman's marginal space is brought to the center for vainglorious purpose because she still remains an object of exploitation. She was not considered a human being but is valued because of the wealth she will bring to the family. The wealth expected from her is no longer through her bride price, but

from her daily bodily sales. After working for years as a prostitute for her uncle, she is arrested one day and deported back to Nigeria. There she captivates the heart of Chief, who takes her as a mistress and gives her a house in Port-Harcourt. Due to the excruciating and dreadful experiences she had as a prostitute, she named the house 'Sarah House' which is in memory of a girl she met in Italy who was murdered in a motel. The truth about this house is that though it is owned by Madam, Chief's erstwhile lover but the novel gives us the true founder of the house to be Chief, a big-time politician, Madam's friend, confidant and business partner whose connections "opened a lot of doors for Madam, and kept a lot of unwanted people, including the police from looking too closely at some of the activities in Sarah House as to ascertain what Madam did for a living" (167).

Prostitution which reduces women to the image of mere sexual objects is a consequence of globalization. According to Penttinnen (2008, p.16) globalization impacts the marginalization of women that are defined by their sexuality; however, the world ignores, according to her that women contribute to globalization by their cheap labor in the global assembly line, therefore, trafficked women should not be called prostitutes because "they are corporeal result of globalization". Globalization provides the opportunity for men to travel and buy sex and for women to serve. This emphasizes the objectification of women. Prostitution here therefore is sexual exploitation and a vehicle of oppression that men use to subjugate women by perpetuating a system of gender inequality where men are permissive consumers of women.

In *Sarah House,* Ajaegbo presents his protagonists as sexual objects who are there to satisfy the fantasies and lusts of men. As a result, they are forced into a passive role making their pimps, traffickers and customers assume dominance. This dominance comes with series of exploitations thereby violating the basic human rights of women. Tega educates a naive Nita, who is not

aware of the type of job she is brought to do in Port Harcourt on what life holds for them as sexual objects. According to her Slim and Fatty's wealth comes from their "degradation and subjection to the most humiliating acts known to man" (42) therefore "You do what they ask you to do" (39). Tega captures their helplessness this way: "There is nothing we can do. We are locked up in this place and we cannot leave. We cannot run away. They take us to the place where the men wait for us. Sometimes they bring them here, but this rarely happens because they do not want the police to know about this place. Or about us. When the men finish with us … They pay them" (41). If the men make the mistake of paying the girls, Slim or Fatty or any of the others will collect it. Thereby, exploiting the prostitutes to their own detriment. This aggravates Nita's anger. Tega tells her that the consequence of proving stubborn to Fatty and Slim is that "they get beaten, sometimes raped to teach them a lesson. They told us they had killed one girl who was really stubborn" (41). As part of measures to get the stubborn girls to submit, Slim always gets hostile strangers to rape innocent girls to make them submissive. Nita has not forgotten her experience the first time she was brought to the house and proved stubborn at work. Her punishment was to be raped by a total stranger.

They lock her up in a room and invite a professional rapist who rapes her to make her comfortable with strangers. Nita contemplates suicide. "I was beginning to think that the only way out of this mess was to kill myself. But how? No, I did not feel all right… But I felt like dying knowing that the other girls in the room had heard about me getting comfortable with strangers" (68-69). Locking Nita up shows that pimps want to keep their victims in perpetual slavery to make money for them. In such situations, the choice and consent of these victims are not taken into consideration rather they are compelled to sell sex themselves and thus their womanhood as negotiated by their traffickers. Raping her is also not surprising because violence in the form of rape in

the prostitution profession is inevitable. Prostitution itself is a form of sexualized male violence. Rape, assaults, verbal abuse etc are inherent characteristics or qualities.

Dworkin (1995, p.239) asserts that:

> The relationship of prostitution to rape is simple and direct: whatever can be stolen can be sold; This means that women were both stolen and sold, and when practices were codified into laws women were defined as sexual chattel. Women are still basically viewed as sexual chattel-socially, legally, culturally, and in practice.

Although prostitution is not totally uncommon in most societies, the dissipation of the act and the degradation of the prostitutes totally strip them of their dignity and virtues which African women are identified with. While with Fatty and Slim, the girls are made to wear skimpy dresses that expose almost all delicate parts of their bodies in order to get customers especially wealthy men who are their major customers. Sometimes, part of the girls' preoccupation is to dance in sensuous steps and they are usually required to go completely naked. "Full, perfect breasts with shiny black nipples, painted with a film of oil to heighten the effect, heaved and jiggled with each sensuous movement around the pole" (80). The situation is not different at Sarah House. Having been resold to Madam, the first thing Nita notices is how shabby the girls are already in Madam's dresses. She observes "three very pretty girls with long legs, dressed in net bras with their nipples pointing through holes in the fabric and very tight bum shorts" (88). Madam gets a lecherous tailor to sew skimpy outfits for the newly bought girls. Nita reports with dismay that even the tailor is allowed to handle the girls however it pleases him. Nita relates pathetically that the tailor "picked up the tape once more and resumed measuring Tega, fondling her breasts and caressing her buttocks". As a sexual slave who lacks autonomy, Tega is not expected to resist. The other girls

who had been with Madam understood the tradition. Hence, "Across the room, Miko and Sele watched from their beds. The look of amusement on their faces told me this was nothing new to them either. This was something they had become used to, being caressed and fondled by anyone because they did not own themselves" (120).

Ajaegbo's portrayal of the commodification of Nita and other girls becomes more exploitative when they are seen as commodities to be bought and sold at will. Tunca (2009, p.9) points out that "The selling and parading of the girls, as well as their renaming by their new "owners" doubtlessly evoke the slave markets of the past". At a deeper level it connotes total subjugation. Madam of Sarah House pronounced the girls "good products" (89) after a thorough inspection of the human commodities presented to her by Slim and Fatty for purchase. Nita reveals that she "felt like an animal being looked over before a buyer made an offer" (89). Being inspected seems like a vital ingredient of the business. Nita says that even the friends of their captors and other customers "…looked over us like prized commodities displayed for the benefit of buyers**"** (140). The ideology that underlies the narrative implies that the cabal of power that operates the sex trafficking network has no human feelings and makes no distinction between business and human dignity. Chilton (2004, p.47) points out that the most extreme form of de-legitimization "…is to deny the humanness of the other".

The whole idea of buying and selling humans as commodities in the market is a form of de-legitimizing others and totally denying them their humanness. Madam distinctly expresses some form of de-legitimization of the other when she thwarts Nita's resistance, "He sold you to me…I paid good money for you" (156–157). The expression is not just to intimidate Nita but to also communicate the impression that she is now one of Madam's personal possessions since she has paid good money to have her. Nita describes Madam as "…our new owner. Slim and Fatty had sold us

to her" (107). She further informs us that "Madam had paid Slim and Fatty for us. She owned us now and could tell us to do whatever she wanted. She had bought us the way other people bought useful items at the market" (109). Nita informs that us "Madam made it clear that we are her possessions. We did not make the rules here. We obeyed them" (119). She is depicted as a beautiful but ruthless business woman who "…bought and sold people as if they were objects" (157).

Ajaegbo, emphasizes the degree of degradation prostitutes can witness as sexual objects in a patriarchal society. These girls are abused physically and sexually: "Tega walked into the room first, her steps unsteady on wobbly legs…Matti came in after Tega. She looked tired. Below her left eye, a huge bruise nestled in the folded flesh" (18). When Miko came in after being used by Lothar, she shuffled towards her bed and the corner of the room… Fatigue was etched into every line and pore of her face…she moved wearily to her bed and lowered herself down" (101–102). Madam allows Lothar, a foreigner from Germany to make pornographic movies with the girls as stars. He therefore chooses his partner from among the prostitutes in the house and uses belts, whips and other bizarre things in bed. Nita makes us understand how disgusting the pornographic movie made by Lothar is. She says that after some time, "the performance on the bed became revolting" (147). It is quite disheartening the kind of freedom given to Lothar by Madam to choose among the girls who to act in pornographic movies with.

The consent of the girls is never sought. Any of them chosen is expected to comply. Nita says I was amazed when, "someone touched my right shoulder. I stiffened, then realized the sounds coming from the bed had stopped...I opened my eyes, expecting to see Tega's hand or perhaps Stella's on my shoulder. I was surprised to see Lothar standing before me (148). Nita's refusal to act in a pornographic movie with him amazes the girls because they know that the consequence of her refusal is brutal. As for

Sele, she "collapsed against Tega's body… she cried out in pain as the supporting arms touched an injury we could not see… Sele's body was a mass of bruises and burns. Some of the injuries were minor. The others were open wounds oozing a clear white fluid mixed with blood. A thin film of sweat coated her brow" (103). All these show the degree of physical torture and emotional consequences, these girls have to endure working for their owner, Madam. "Pain is pain regardless of who inflicted it, when it was inflicted and how" (105). Madam and her ilk are apparently insensitive to the pain the girls have to go through in order to meet her material expectations. Due to the physical and emotional pain, Tega becomes depressed. She says to Nita "I can't take this anymore" (219). She tries to escape from captivity but is caught and murdered.

Conclusion

Although men can also be sexually objectified, the objectifying gaze targets women more than men. Sexual objectification of women involves them being viewed primarily as object of male sexual desire. Prostitution becomes a situation where men have reduced women to image of mere sexual objects. Hence, prostitution is sexual exploitation and a vehicle of oppression that subjugates and dehumanizes women robbing them of their dignity and fundamental human rights. Thus, women who are trafficked into prostitution become sexual commodities to be bought and sold at will because they lack autonomy. This situation therefore makes them passive. Ajaegbo through his female protagonist in *Sarah House*, portrays that the socio-economic conditions of Nigerian women infringe on their dreams and desire for a better life, which are expressed through globalization. This makes them fall prey to traffickers who coerce them into prostitution. Nita rejects male exploitation and subordination by escaping from Sarah house. This shows her motivation to reclaim her dignity and fundamental rights as a human being. It is pertinent to say therefore that the Nigerian government should create job opportunities so as to alleviate

poverty through reformation and rehabilitation programs, public enlightenment that can educate not only women but also parents and family members on the dangers of prostitution, sports and cultural activities, arrest any procurer or trafficker, and introduce sex education in the curriculum of secondary schools and tertiary institutions.

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