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## Human Trafficking, Organ Harvesting and the Politics of the Body in Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*

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### Abstract

*The activities of human trafficking for sex and organ harvesting have become increasingly prevalent in Nigeria in recent times, as reported by various media outlets. Many Nigerians have fallen victim to these heinous crimes, often finding themselves trapped in situations of exploitation, abuse, violence and in some cases, even death. Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's novel, Sarah House, explores the issues of human trafficking for sex slavery and illicit organ trade in Nigeria. The paper adopts Marxist theory and the snail-sense feminist theory to examine the experiences of the different characters in the novel. The analysis reveals the nexus between human trafficking for sex and illegal organ harvesting in Nigeria. This study further demonstrates the ruthless nature of human trafficking and highlights the challenges in eradicating it, given the complex networks and the powerful individuals involved. By highlighting the prevalence of human trafficking and organ harvesting, this paper recommends that the government take action to develop comprehensive strategies to combat human trafficking for sex slavery and regulate organ transplantation in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Human trafficking, Sex slavery, Organ harvesting, Marxist theory, Snail-sense feminism.

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### Introduction

The dire social and economic realities in Nigeria have made many Nigerians vulnerable to various forms of exploitation by criminal elements in the country. People can become susceptible to situations they would otherwise avoid in their quest for better socio-economic opportunities. The twin scourges of human trafficking and illegal organ harvesting are not something alien to Nigerians. To Vageshjith and Kaur, human trafficking is the “trade of humans for forced labour, sexual slavery, or commercial sexual exploitation for the trafficker or others” (255). Vageshjith and Kaur

further add that human trafficking is considered globally as “widespread violation of human rights” (257).

The deportations and gory tales of trafficked persons from countries such as Libya, Saudi Arabia and other parts of the world have helped to draw the attention of Nigerians to the evil of human trafficking. Many young girls and women are lured with the promise of a better life but they are instead exploited as sex slaves. Sex slavery, according to Ewuzie, is a “condition in which one human being is owned by another and forced or otherwise coerced into working in a sex trade” (330). The trafficked individuals are





also subjected to other forms of modern-day slavery and in some cases, individuals are trafficked for illegal organ removal.

Trafficking in persons for organ removal, often linked to human trafficking, is also one of the ways criminal elements within and outside Nigeria exploit vulnerable individuals. Organ removal is gaining roots in Nigeria as in many parts of the world due to the high demand for organ transplants. Maginn explains trafficking in persons for organ removal as “when a person of vulnerability is exploited, deceived, coerced, or abused for the illicit use of their organ” (1). Human trafficking, in whatever form, is illegal and it erodes the rights of those trafficked. Vageshjith and Kaur consider human trafficking as a serious threat to world peace and security and also a crime against humanity (257).

For the traffickers and their collaborators, the human body is the product that forms the basis for their illegal trade. The shadowy criminal market revolves around the selling and buying of human beings either for cheap labour, sex, other related kinds of servitude or for the illegal removal of human organs for transplant. In several ways, the human body is crucial for the operation of the illegal business of human trafficking for sex slavery and organ harvesting. Human trafficking severely demeans the human body and it is why it should not be allowed to continue in whatever form.

Literature, as Ngugi argues, “does not grow in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored” (xvi). The writer mirrors the socio-economic and political realities of his or her society. Usman asserts that the “literary writer as a member of the society projects his/her ideas on observations and happenings in the society through his literary writings” (3). Ifeanyi Ajaegbo’s novel, *Sarah House*, sheds light on the dark realities of human trafficking and trafficking in persons for organ removal in Nigeria. The article examines how the novel portrays the commodification of the human body as an intersection for both trafficking for sex slavery and illegal organ removal.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper employs Marxist and snail-sense feminist theories for this study. Marxism is particularly relevant to this study because it helps to highlight not only class struggle in Ajaegbo’s novel but also buttresses Amuta’s position that an essential feature of Marxist discourse revolves around the unequal power dynamics between the “exploiter and the exploited” (72). The novel captures how certain individuals use their position of influence in society to oppress and exploit the less privileged members of that society. According to Amuta, “Marxist literary theory in Africa and parts of the third





world is preoccupied with the responsibility of literature and art in the task of national liberation, anti-imperialism and redressing of social inequalities within individual national societies" (54). Furthermore, Amuta notes that the peculiar social experience within a given society provides the literary inspiration for individual writers (62) as depicted in Ajaegbo's reflection of the exploitation of vulnerable individuals in the Nigerian society for prostitution and illegal organ removal in his debut novel, *Sarah House*.

Snail-sense feminism by Akachi Ezeigbo is one of the Afro-centric brands of feminism. Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism addresses pertinent issues affecting women in patriarchal societies. The theory provides solutions to address the challenges women often encounter in patriarchal societies and also, promotes empowerment as a means of securing women's emancipation. Ezeigbo argues that Nigerian society, with its patriarchal culture, is a harsh terrain for women to thrive because, according to her, most "Nigerian cultures devalue women." Just like the snail, Nigerian women must learn to navigate the "rocks, thorny and spiky surfaces" (27) of their society to survive.

This paper deploys Marxist theory to examine the intersection of class power structure and human exploitation in Nigeria's sex and organ harvesting criminal networks, thereby highlighting the systematic exploitation of the marginalised class

by the rich and exploitative class while the snail-sense feminist theory, on the hand, is employed to examine the strategies of the female protagonist in Ajaegbo's novel to navigate the exploitative networks by mainly the male characters that confine her to a life of a sex slave.

## Literature Review

Several research works have been conducted on human trafficking for sex slavery and for organ removal. This is because human trafficking, whether for sex or organ removal, is a topical issue around the world.

Obani and Okunrobo (2020) examine the disturbing reports on illegal organ harvesting packaged as ritual killings in some places in Nigeria. The paper highlights the need for a regulatory framework to curb organ trafficking in the country. The paper also addresses the multiple factors fueling organ trafficking in Nigeria and recommends ways to regulate organ donation.

The main focus of Adeleye's (2021) paper is on human trafficking and prostitution in border communities between Nigeria and Benin Republic. The paper explores the Nigerian-Benin border as a hub for human trafficking. The study examines how the border dynamics between the two West African countries aid human trafficking and Adeleye concludes by highlighting how the criminal activity of human trafficking has impacted the economic activities around the



border communities between Nigeria and Benin Republic.

In his paper, Kamalu (2019) explores the linguistic portrayal of the inner feelings and attitudes of victims of sex slavery in three Nigerian novels. The paper argues that sex slavery is a violation of the humanity of the victims as it impacts their physical and mental health negatively.

Ewuzie (2022) explores how traffickers use violence as a way of subjugating women into submission and extracting silence from them. The study argues that public awareness of the nefarious activities of human traffickers and the involvement of law enforcement agents are necessary to stem the tide of human trafficking in Nigeria.

Nnyagu et al (2023) argue in their paper that as a result of the dire socio-economic situation in the country, people indulge in questionable acts to survive. The paper highlights how Ajaegbo's novel exposes the depravities in the Nigerian society as captured in *Sarah House*, the criminal elements behind human trafficking and the inevitable effects on the society.

Ogbazi and Awaraka (2024) in their paper discuss how literature captures the experiences of people in a given time and place. The paper examines the subjugation and sexual objectification in *Sarah House*. The paper reveals the unsettling experiences of prostitutes in Nigeria as reflected in Ajaegbo's novel. The study concludes by calling on the

Nigerian government to create job opportunities, raise public awareness about human trafficking and arrest human traffickers as a way of putting an end to the societal menace.

This study examines the intersection of human trafficking and organ trafficking, a connection not examined in the reviewed papers. Also, the papers reviewed did not explore as this study, the human body as a site of contestation for both the illegal trade of sex trafficking and organ removal.

### **Societal Drivers of Vulnerability to Trafficking**

*Sarah House* is the debut novel by the Nigerian novelist, Ifeanyi Ajaegbo. It talks about issues of sex slavery and organ trafficking in Nigeria. The novel explores why some individuals become easily susceptible to human traffickers, as illustrated in the experience of the protagonist, Nita. The novel shows how a lack of economic opportunity becomes one of the reasons why people fall victim to human trafficking. Adeleye asserts that "poverty is a major vulnerability factor for the females who are victims of human trafficking" (17). The desire for economic emancipation drives Nita and the other girls into the deceptive arms of those who profess love to them. Adeleye argues that "the first level of recruiters operates from the point of friendship, care and romance" (13). Slim deceives Nita just like the other girls with a dream of a better and glamorous life:



Slim's voice played through my mind as I remembered the last night I spent with him in the village, which was my last night in Opobo. I had listened to him talk about the new life we could have together. He painted pictures of a new beginning in his tales of the city, tales of good schools, after which people got well-paying. He talked about black people like us who got jobs from the oil companies .... These were the tales that fired my imagination, that had my spirit soaring among the stars of possibilities. (38)

Instead of the promise of a "future filled with possibilities," Slim subjects the girls he deceived, as Tega puts it, to a "life of prostitutes. The life of slaves" (39). Deception is a tactic that traffickers use to lure their victims. This aligns with Adeleye's position that human trafficking victims are "deceived and traded into sexual slavery by members of an organised criminal syndicate who derive financial benefits from these illegal activities" (5). The commodity that sustains Slim's criminal enterprise is the regular supply of vulnerable girls and women. Ajaegbo's *Sarah House* beams a literary lens on the socio-economic issues that make it possible for human traffickers like Slim and Fatty to lure young girls into the world of sex slavery.

## Human Trafficking for Sex in *Sarah House*

Ajaegbo's *Sarah House* vividly depicts the horrifying plight of young girls trafficked into sex slavery in Nigeria. The depth of deprivation that the girls are subjected to illustrates the need for the government to put a stop to human trafficking in the country. Nnyagu et al argue that *Sarah House* poignantly reflects the "high level of depravity in contemporary Nigerian society" (104). The novel shows how some Nigerians exploit other Nigerians in the quest for wealth.

The novel depicts human traffickers as callous beings without the tiniest shred of human emotion. Slim lures Nita from her village to Port Harcourt with the deceptive show of affection and a promise of a "life of glamour" (30). None of the girls with Slim voluntarily chooses to trade their body for sex; rather, they are coerced into prostitution by deceit, threat and violence. This shows that some of the girls who are into prostitution may not have willingly opted for it, as in the case of Nita and the other girls. The experience of the protagonist embodies the struggles of female victims who defied commodification and exploitation as sex slaves. Nita is sexually assaulted by a stranger sent by Slim when she refused to trade her body for money as a means of breaking her will. This confirms Gqola's argument that sexual assault is used to discipline women everywhere and she argues further that in "detention, sexual assault



reminds women of their legitimate place: powerless and weak” (xxiii). The power structure within the house where the girls are housed as sex slaves by Slim and Fatty deprives them of their rights and autonomy. Nita recognises the dynamics of power in Slim’s den and she adopts self-preservation as advocated by Ezeigbo as a strategy to navigate her escape from the perilous situation she finds herself in.

Slim's and Fatty's dispositions towards the girls buttress Tyson's argument about how the menfolk "... "continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness" (85). The girls are housed and fed according to Fatty to "make money for us, eh? Isn't that right, girls?" (18). Ajaegbo's novel highlights the fact that human trafficking is seen by the people who indulge in it as a business, as affirmed by Slim, Fatty, Madam and also, as captured in this conversation between Nita and Tega:

'Mugus?' I repeated under my breath.

'Men and women who pay for sex. That is what we call them in this business.'

'Who are they? You call this a business?'

'For us, it may not be, Nita. But for Slim and Fatty, it is about money. It is about how much money they can make from your pain and suffering, from our pain and suffering. Their wealth comes from our

degradation and subjection to the most humiliating acts known to man.' (42)

Ajaegbo presents human trafficking in the novel as nothing but a criminal activity that the security agencies must wipe out. Slim and Fatty selling Nita and Tega to Madam, the owner of Sarah House, supports the argument that human trafficking is seen as a business, albeit an illegal one to the government. It equally illustrates that to human traffickers like Slim, Fatty and Madam, trafficked individuals like Nita and Tega are merely mercantile commodities that can be bought and sold for profit. The perception of Slim, Fatty and Madam of the trafficked women as commodities indicates the concept of commodification in Marxist discourse, which, according to Tyson, is the attitude of relating to persons or objects in terms of their usefulness and monetary values (59). The scene where Fatty takes Nita and Tega to meet Madam at Sarah House illustrates the inherent worth of the girls as products of mercantile:

'You are welcome to Sarah House,' Madam said, her eyes lingering briefly on Fatty before shifting to me .... 'She is beautiful,' she said to Fatty, but still looking at me.

'She is. We know you will like her.' Her dark, bright eyes moved from my face to my body, lingering on my barely covered breasts and a little longer on my bared, flat stomach. I felt like an



animal being looked over before a buyer made an offer. Just when I thought I would melt under her hot gaze, Madam turned towards Tega. She gave Tega the same look-over. 'Good products.' Fatty beamed. 'We know you will be impressed. We always have the best.' (89).

Sarah House is a house of unimaginable depravities from sex slavery, graphic pornographic display and filming to organ harvesting. Sarah House is "a world of the damned. A place where few survived. And those who survived were never the same again" (106). It is simply a house where various acts of immorality and callous deeds are not only accommodated but also shielded from the prying eyes of security agencies. Madam herself was a victim of human trafficking to Italy for sex slavery but instead of fighting to stop the illegal act, she becomes a heartless perpetrator herself. Nita finds it hard to understand that Madam, who was trafficked as a young girl, is the same person who "bought us from Slim and Fatty to sleep with men and make money for her, to dance nude in clubs" (110). This corroborates the assertion of Oladipo et al that "most traffickers who recruit women and girls for sex or domestic work are women who were victims of human trafficking" (2). Madam represents the social category that Amuta refers to as a "middle social and economic stratum" (68), which in the Marxist class structure is

characterised by a dual role of being both exploited and exploiter.

The clientele of Sarah House is made up of "lot of influential and highly placed friends, businessmen and politicians in the country. These people often needed to indulge in the sort of pleasure the public must not know about or the country would be awash with scandal" (113). Chief, a powerful politician and a former lover of Madam, is one of those who frequents Sarah House to indulge and carry out depraved acts. Chief's hedonistic lifestyle mirrors that of many Nigerian politicians who devote more time to personal pleasure and interests rather than seeking solutions to the myriad of issues facing the country. Through Chief, Lothar and Madam, the novel throws light on the various depraved sexual acts that trafficked women are subjected to. Nita's encounter with Chief illustrates the Marxist concepts of self-alienation and alienation from the products of labour. She experiences self-alienation as she is commodified and traded for financial gain. Furthermore, she is alienated from the product of her labour, as Madam collects all the money from her services to Chief, depriving her of any financial compensation.

### **Human Trafficking for Organ Harvesting in *Sarah House***

Ajaegbo's *Sarah House* shows how the illegal trade in organ removal is connected to human trafficking. The novel highlights the horrendous dark world of human trafficking. Kamalu asserts rightly the "shocking revelation of bizarre and inhuman practices" (117) that





thrive at Sarah House. Sarah House is not just a site for all manner of sexual depravities but a place that also highlights the unfathomable depths of human cruelty. Vulnerable children are housed and fed in one section of the premises for the singular purpose of organ harvesting.

While Madam claims that the orphanage was established to bring hope for disadvantaged children, Nita finds it “difficult to believe that a person who bought and sold young women who were little more than children themselves would go out of her way to protect the orphans from such activities” (160). The partnership between Madam and Chief in child trafficking for organ harvesting is orchestrated by Lothar, a German filmmaker, whom Chief rescued after his film activities were exposed to the authorities. In appreciation, Lothar “had introduced Chief to several lines of business that might not stand the test of any legal system in the world, but were immensely lucrative and only required a slight deadening of the conscience” (188). Characters such as Chief, Madam, Slim and Fatty represent people without conscience, who are willing to indulge in any criminal activities for money. Chief, in particular, according to Uche Nnyagu et al, is the sort of politician who, instead of protecting the people rather “causes perils to the masses” (106). Chief buttresses Amuta’s position that “the ruling classes and the bourgeoisie in Africa are hardly men of culture in any patriotic sense of the word” (72).

In Nnolim’s view, the Nigerian writer must tackle the

“problem of good and evil in his society” (223) and not only that, Nnolim challenges writers to show in their writings that they are the ultimate “enemy of sinister forces in the society” (230). *Sarah House* is a powerful attestation that Ajaegbo heeds Nnolim’s call to Nigerian writers about their place in the perennial struggle between the forces of good and evil in Nigeria.

Through the tragic fate of Damka, a child in the orphanage with whom the protagonist forms a bond, the novel exposes the unimaginable evil of human organ trafficking and the need for the government to stop the illicit activities in Nigeria. Ezeigbo notes that for a woman to overcome impediments placed in her way, “she has to be proactive and strong” (28). Despite what Slim, Fatty and Madam subjected her to as a sex slave, Nita adopts the snail-sense strategies of refusing to be “crushed easily” but rather “climb up and down rocks, thorny and spiky surfaces” (27) of the terrible life she is forced to live and she remains “resilient and dogged or determined” (28) to destroy the criminal enterprises run by Madam and her criminal partners. Nita decides to team up with Mofe, an undercover detective, to bring down Chief, Madam and the other criminals after the death of Damka and Tega. Through the conversation between Mofe and Nita, *Sarah House* problematises the difficulty of completely eradicating human trafficking in Nigeria:

Suddenly, quickly, Mofe told me about gangs of thugs and cult members



who trafficked in women and children. Well-organised criminal gangs that were so entrenched that they had bought their way into the police and other law-enforcement agencies using their connections with politicians and big-time business people. The activities of these gangs supplied the commodities for the sex-and-organ-transplant market in Nigeria and abroad. I listened for more than half an hour as she detailed the activities of these gangs whose members doubled as pimps who supplied everything from prostitutes and escorts to illegal organs harvested from unwilling victims. (245).

Nita eventually escapes from Sarah House with enough evidence to bring down the criminal empire of Madam, Chief, Slim, and Fatty. The protagonist of Ajaegbo's novel challenges the assumption that cohabiting with criminals may lead to one embracing criminality and that being a victim of human trafficking, like Madam, may predispose one to becoming a trafficker. Nita and Madam underscore the significance of personal choices in navigating life's challenges.

## Conclusion

This paper explores the criminal activities of individuals who engage in the trafficking of girls and women for sex slavery and children for the illegal organ transplant market within and outside Nigeria. The study shows how the quest for a better life renders individuals vulnerable to being victims of human trafficking. Through the experiences of the trafficked women and children in Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*, the paper exposes the dark and brutal world of the activities of human traffickers in Nigeria. The paper also highlights the complexities inherent in the fight to eliminate the menace of human trafficking.

The paper reveals how some Nigerians, in collaboration with foreigners, undermine government agencies for selfish reasons. It also highlights the notion that personal choices underscore how an individual navigates challenges in life. This paper concludes that indulging in criminal activities is certainly not the way out of poverty. This paper equally highlights the urgent need for the government to put in place regulatory measures for organ transplantation in the country and also to eliminate human trafficking for sex slavery in Nigeria.



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