

**SEXUAL ABUSE AND FEMALE SUBJUGATION IN AMMA DARKO'S *FACELESS*
AND IFEANYI AJAEGBO'S *SARAH HOUSE***

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Abstract

This paper explores the presentations of issues of sexual abuse and the subjugation of the female characters in Amma Darko's *Faceless* (2003) and Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House* (2013). Sexual abuse is a global phenomenon. In most cases where reports of sexual abuses are made women are likely going to be victims more than men. Feminist theory seems to be the best suited theoretical approach when it comes to examining issues such as rape and the subjugation of the voice of women who are victims of rape. Using the platform of feminist theory, the study highlights how the selected novels have brought to the fore issues of sexual abuse and female subjugation. The fate of street children who are at the mercy of rapists, bullies and ritualist, is highlighted in *Faceless* and the molestation of Nita and other women who are trafficked in *Sarah House* are presented in this study so as to call attention to the marginalization and subjugation of women in the society. The study further shows that women are the core victims of sexual abuse in the society. This study also submit that women can actually counter these abuses by standing and speaking against it and for themselves. The paper suggests that more awareness need to be created or raised against the issue of sexual abuse in our society in a world that has gradually transformed to a global village.

Background

Sexual abuse is a form of violence that involves non-consensual sexual acts or behavior inflicted on the individual. It encompasses a range of acts, including rape, sexual assault, molestation, harassment and exploitation. Generally, sexual abuse can be traced back through recorded accounts and cultural narratives, although it is important to acknowledge that many instances, of sexual abuse may have gone unreported or undocumented, it has been silenced or ignored with victims facing stigma, blame, and disbelief. Over time, societies have begun to acknowledge the prevalence and impact of sexual abuse leading to efforts to support survivors, raise awareness, and enact legal protection. It has to be noted that for much of the early history, sexual harassment and abuse--namely rape, was considered to be a defilement of a man's property (the father or the husband's) rather than a crime against women. There has been a disregard for the victim's feelings and the traumatic effects rape brings on the victims, and most of the given reflects that. While there are some minor differences between how different cultures considered and punished rape, most of them share this common factor. However, both the consideration and the punishment for rape began to change with time.

According to a survey by Josef Spigel, 16% of males are sexually abused by age

eighteen (560). This record show that the number of men that are sexually abused are significantly lower when compared to that of women who have been sexually abused. Most sexual abuse--but certainly not all--are committed by men. Val Young has stated that 90% of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are men (19). It is becoming increasingly clear that more women become victims of rape or attempted rape in their life time. Records further show that the rate of reported cases of rape started to increase from 1980 (Diana Russel 84).

According to a World Health Organization (WHO) report released in 2021, perpetrators of sexual abuse often employ power, coercions, or manipulation to control their victims. Approximately, one in three women worldwide has experienced sexual abuse as against one in six men. Sexual contact in the context under study is usually understood to encompass any intentional touching, fondling, or penetration of intimate parts of the victim's body by the perpetrators for the purpose of arousing or satisfying the perpetrators' sexual desires or as a means of degrading, humiliating, or punishing the victim. Criminal sexual contact thus includes acts of sexual violence such as rape. Although legal consent to an act of sexual contact has been defined in various ways, it is generally considered to be absent in most if not all of the following circumstances: The victim actively resists the act, the victim is a minor or a child, the victim lacks understanding of the significance or consequences of the act, or the victim is mentally or physically incapacitated in relevant ways, for example by being intoxicated or unconscious.

There has been a growing recognition of the widespread nature of sexual abuse. Different movements have been formed just to champion the fight against sexual abuse. This increased awareness and advocacy have led to significant shifts in public discourse, legal reforms and support services for survivors. The effects of sexual abuse can be profound and long-lasting, impacting various aspects of an individual's physical, psychological, and social wellbeing survivors of sexual abuse often face long lasting, physical, psychological and emotional consequences, survivors are at higher risks of developing mental health challenges or disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and substances abuse. The impact can extend to various areas of their lives, including relationships, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Most victims of sexual violence are women, a fact that reflects their social stance even in this 21st century, as inferior to men. Sexual violence is another mans of oppressing women in a patriarchal society. Perpetrators of sexual violence in a patriarchal society adopt the approach of instilling fear in their victims so as to stop them from speaking out.

A Feminist Approach to the Understanding of Sexual Abuse

An understanding of the feminist theory guides most study of novels that dwell on issues of sexual abuse being that the feminist scholar would pay attention to gender and power dynamics in such novels. Feminist theory is a broad and diverse framework that examines issues of gender, power and inequality. It seeks to understand and challenge the ways in which women have been historically oppressed and marginalized in the society. The theory emerged as a response to pervasive gender inequalities and the subordination of women in sociopolitical and socioeconomic spheres.

The Second Sex (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneering feminist philosopher and scholar, is considered to be a foundational text of feminist theory. de Beauvoir critically examines the construction of femininity and argues that women have historically been defined in relation to

men, thereby leading to their (women's) subordination.

A short biography of Amma Darko and Ifeanyi Ajaegbo

Amma Darko was born in Tamale, Ghana in 1956. She attended the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana where she obtained a BSc degree in 1980. Darko worked briefly for Ghana Technology Consultancy Center after graduation. Some soldiers staged a coup in 1981 in Ghana. This led to the suspension of constitutional democracy in Ghana and many young Ghanaians fled abroad for safety and greener pastures. Darko was among this group of men and women that left the country immediately the military took over governance. She relocated to Germany where she rented a one room apartment and started engaging in menial jobs to fend for herself. Her first novel, *Beyond the Horizons* (1991) was awarded the Ghana Book Award in 1998. Darko was also named author of the year by the Africa-themed German literary group, *Afrikahaus* same year.

Ifeanyi Ajaegbo was born in Enugu Nigeria, in 1971. He has published *Sarah House* (2012) and *Tent 59* (2021). He won the commonwealth short story prize for African region in 2005 and the Association of Nigerian Authors, (ANA) Prose Prize for 2006. He participated in the Crossing Borders Writing Programme of the British Council in 2005-2006. Apart from being a writer, performer, and Culture Development expert, Ajaegbo loves, teaches and plays basketball a lot. He has also fought and taught martial arts. He is also the founder secretary of the Society for Relevant Art and Culture (SORAC). His creative works and essays have appeared in many journals and magazines.

Abandoned Children, Sexual Abuse and Dysfunctional Parenting in *Faceless*

Darko's novel opens with the fourteen years old Fofu in the street where she lives with other abandoned and homeless children. The narrator, immediately informs the readers that Fofu “chose to spend the night on the old cardboard laid out in front of the provision store at the Agbogbloshie market place.” (1) *Faceless* is a clear reminder that the society, seems to have forgotten that it is not enough to reproduce and replenish the earth with reckless ecstasy. Children brought into this world must be taken care of by their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers and indeed the society where they are brought into. Fofu and her friend Odarley sleep in the street because her mother, Maa Tsuru cannot afford to take care of them. Fofu and other abandoned children are left at the mercy of men like poison, “the street lord.” (8) It seems the children take to street life out their own volition.

Street lords like Poison, Macho and Onko are sexual predators who lay siege on these abandoned street children. They operate as sexual vultures who go about devouring girls in the ghetto of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even in the supposedly secured space of their one room apartment, Fofu's sister, Baby T is exploited by her step father, Kpakpo. We read that:

Kpakpo tiptoed over to Baby T and tapped her on the shoulder. Baby T sprang up, still drowsy. Kpakpo beckoned her to follow him. It all seemed like a scene in a zombie film. Baby T walked slowly, like there was no life in her. She followed him to behind the curtain. Fofu's heart pounded fast and loud inside her chest. Kpakpo took Baby T's hand and sat on the bed. He placed Baby T before him and signed her to remove her dress. Baby T obeyed as though in a trance. He savoured Baby T's

maturing body hungrily with his eyes. Then he brushed the back of one hand over Baby T's breast and drew down her pants (133).

Implicit in the portion cited above is the deceitful manner and the constant breach of trust of the unsuspecting and innocent young girls by trusted neighbours and family members. In fact, Fofu thought about going over to visit the deceitful and sneaky Onko to inform him of what Kpakpo did to Baby T. Onko is a corrupts pronunciation of "uncle" by children in the ghetto of Sodom and Gomorrah (128). Onko is notorious for his generosity for he often gives out "toffees in his room to sooth and calm down crying children." (128) He even allows these children to come to his house and watch television. Fofu and her sister, Baby T often run to him to confide in him, as we have noted earlier. Fofu and Baby T confide Onko how their father abandoned them. Onko moved in to live with "them in their one room and Maa Tsuru told them to look upon him as their new father" (128) after their father abandoned them. Fofu once described Onko as the "generous and understanding man." (134) This Onko it is that kept defiling Baby T without showing understanding to a point of helplessness and with reckless abandon.

Any attempt to take record of families in *Faceless* will reveal that there are actually no real family in the novel. Available data show that "parents" live together for a while, have children, and go separate ways, as a new normal, in Darko's internal world. In most of the cases seen in the novel, the children are left for the mothers to take care of them. This method of parenting is dangerous. It affects the psychological development of children. Fofu, the protagonist of Darko's *Faceless* has

often concluded that maybe what she deemed to be hatred for her mother was actually a passionate loathing for some of the things Maa Tsuru had done that maybe it was her intense hatred for those things that diminished to almost non-existence, the delicate line between her mother and herself and the things she had done. They were thoughts that she sometimes wished desperately to go away. But something always awakened them like restless ghosts at night, like now when her eyes beheld the creaking wooden gate of the compound house (20).

The portion of the novel cited shows Fofu's existence is driving her crazy. She holds her mother responsible for bringing her into this world. She does not know whether she is supposed to hate or love her mother because of what has come to befall her. She believes her mother should be held responsible for all her suffering in the world. At other times she begins to shift her hatred to her non-existent father.

Apart from Fofu's "family" there are other four families that bred street children in the novel. The pathetic case of Fofu's family is worth recounting here. At age sixteen (16), Kwei had impregnated Maa Tsuru to his own mother's displeasure. He however, takes a bottle of schnapps to "Tsuru's family and announced that he had come to show his face." (119) From then, they "lived" together and were blessed with four (4) children--two boys and two girls. However, after the two sons came, Kwei seemed not to want a child anymore. He only wanted to continue making out with Maa Tsuru without producing children. He beats her up while she was pregnant for Baby T, their third child (and first daughter), in a failed bid to abort the foetus. He disappeared before the baby was born only to resurface after months of the baby delivery. He did

not name the child and this was why she took the name Baby Tsuru and later Baby T, for short. He later lured Maa Tsuru into accepting him once again and the pregnancy for Fofu was the result. Kwei abandoned the family (before Fofu was given birth to) never to be reunited with the “family” again.

Unfortunately, Maa Tsuru gets entangled to another lazy and uncaring man, Kpakpo. He craftily slid in to live with Maa Tsuru and her four children in the same room. He lied to her that he worked in an aluminum factory in Tema. As her new “husband” they began to make out, of course why not? After, their first night together Maa Tsuru's sons went missing from the family. As they were discussing the boys' disappearance, Maa Tsuru recalled that “she had noticed them toss and turn on the mats the whole night through. They saw it all. For how long could that go on?” (131) She could have gone in search of her sons but she decided not to look for them. Her action points to the same direction. No real family exists in Darko's *Faceless*. Parents do not care about their children.

Kpakpo is a drunk. He returns every night smelling of the worst kind of Akpeteshie (locally brewed gin). Maa Tsuru becomes pregnant for her new “husband and when she was detained in hospital for premature labour, Kpakpo defiles Baby T. As expected, he eventually abandons Maa Tsuru, after fathering two sons with her. He becomes a full time drunk sometimes sleeping besides dirty gutters in front of a kiosk.

What happened in the case of Odarley? Her father abandoned her mother and the little baby Odarley to their fate. Odarley's mother could not withstand and remains alone, as a single mother, to take care of her daughter, she quickly “found another man” to cohabit with (103). The families presented in *Faceless* compete among themselves to show that they are always willing to live apart and are so unable to work towards the noble takes of parenting their children together. Again, we read that the parents do not properly get married, according to their traditionally accepted norms and practices. They only cohabit and produce children that they are unable to take care of. Children upbringing is supposed to be the direct responsibility of responsible parents but the families presented in Darko's novel fail to realize this. The parents in *Faceless* do not live together to love and care for their children. Kwei abandoned Maa Tsuru and their four (4) children. Kpakpo, on his own part also left his “family.” In order to know about her father's whereabouts, Fofu demands from her mother: “where is he, mother”, and her mother's reply was simply “he left.” (21) No reason to give for his leaving. Fofu blames her mother when she questions in anger: “After all that he did to Baby T? To us all? And you stood by and allowed this smallish man to leave? Just like that?” (21) Onko also did not live with his children. He had two sons from two different women. We are left to ask where will the fatherly love and affection come from since they all leave their families behind.

Trafficking, Objectification and Exploitation of Women in *Sarah House*

In *Sarah House*, Nita, Matti, Tega, Mary, Ibisu, Ibiwa and Dumi are all trafficked from rural areas to the city. Syndicates “take the girls” to “where they worked.” (15) The protagonist, Nita, informs us, the readers that she “watched in stunned silence” as she and other girls “undressed and shipped into different articles of clothing that revealed more than what they concealed” in preparation for a “job” they never really sought for (17) but are being forced to do. Modern slave masters/mistresses force these girls to hawk their bodies as wares to anybody that can afford to

pay.

Ajaegbo highlight significant roles played by agents like Slim in the trafficking of these innocent young ladies in the novel. Slim acts as a true lover initially just to lure unsuspecting young ladies as he tells them of good opportunities that abound in the cities. According to the novel, Slim is actually “a man without conscience, without emotion.” (17) He “talked about a new life unlike what” is obtainable the village (17). The traffickers of these young ladies enrich their pockets, with this heinous trade while the young ladies suffer in shame and pain.” For Slim and fatty. It is about money. It is about how much money they can make from [the] pain and suffering” the girls go through (42). As Nita states: “their wealth comes from our degradation and subjection to the most humiliating acts known to man.” (42)

Trafficked women experienced all forms of abuses in the hands of sex trafficking syndicates and the clients they sleep with. The experience of Tega is a clear example. When “Tega walked into the room first, her steps unsteady on wobbly legs. She looked tired and about to drop to the floor. Matti came in after Tega. She looked as tired...[with] a huge bruise nestled in the further flesh.” (18-19) Trafficked and exploited women experience all these and more. As victims of sexual abuse, they are made to bear all these while carrying out their “duties” as sex, workers without any form of objections. They are treated as if they have no say over what happens to their own body (39). In fact, any attempt to resist is seriously dealt with. Ajaegbo use his novel to reveal how brutal and heartless pimps like Slim, Fatty and madam can be to their victims.

In order to prepare these victims for the rough “job” ahead, they are forced to watch pornographic films or even take part in sexual orgies (147). These young ladies are also made to feel like mere objects. Sexual objectifications occurs when women are treated as dehumanized physical objects of men's desire. This usually manifests in the novel through the experiences they go through and unwanted sexual advances made by men to them. In Ajaegbo's *Sarah House* we read of cases where young women are transported to new environments without their knowledge. This form of modern slavery is even worse because the young women do not have any family relationship with anybody in the places they are taken to. They are relocated to these places as object of sexual satisfaction. The physical state of the ladies after their bodies are used as sex objects leaves nothing to be desired: “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) Sele was made to go through the pain of beating, with bruises inflicted on her by Lothar, a German who sees women as mere sex objects to satisfy his perverse nature. The worst of it all is that he is allowed by Madam to use these women as porn stars in his pornographic movies, in the novel. He uses “belts, whips and other bizarre things in bed” with these women (105).

The acts of objectification and degradation of women bodies are not only limited to men alone. Women also indulge in acts that denigrate and subjugate their fellow women as subhumans. For example, the character madam, a lesbian, also “used whips and belts” on the women. She did not burn and tear at the girls, “yet she was no better than Lothar. Pain was pain regardless of who inflicted it, when it was inflicted and how.” (105) The novel shows how women are sampled like commodities, auctioned like items to be sold off, bought and sold with no respect for their bodies (105).

The depiction of female characters as victims in Ajaegbo's novel is clear, as we have shown in our analysis. It is also clear that some of these young women seemed to have chosen to see themselves as objects of sexual satisfaction because the society has patterned them (the women) as such. We read that "from the moment Stella breezed into the room to announce that we were dancing at the Golden Cave, a frenzy of excitement had taken hold of Miko and Sele." (150-151) The voice of the participant narrator we hear in the novel made it clear that "they busied themselves selecting cloths and holding them up for Stella's inspection and approval." (151) It is obvious that they were excited that they were going to entertain guests with their bodies and this is alone is irritating.

Finally, Ajaegbo seems to suggest that it is the economic situation of the nation that make it possible for these women to fall prey to pimps like Slim. These women are faced with hardship and can barely survive which makes it possible for them to be exploited by the *bourgeoisies-traffickers*. These situation makes it possible for Nita to be trapped by the smooth-talking Slim. Nita accepted the offer of getting out of her Opobo village into the better life that staying in the city offers. She did not want to continue living a life of hardship and discomfort in Opobo. Nita and the other trafficked girls in the novel are used to depict Nigeria as a society that does not favour the lower class due to constant exploitation by the power brokers.

Conclusion

Faceless and *Sarah House* dwell on the 21st century Africa. Both novels reveal the experiences of women in Africa, giving us vivid details of cases of sexual abuse against women. *Faceless* almost realistically paints the picture of a faceless and bleak African society. The narrative highlights a society that does not seem to have any future or at the best has a bleak future, a society that abandoned its very essence, core values, beauty, pride, hopes at represented by such divine gift as children and begins to pursue shadows and materialism. Darko presents a tragic vision for the continent hoping that parents and government will reexamine the situation and decide to offer her citizen the best. *Sarah House* beams the light on how young ladies are used as sex slaves and trafficked from one place to another in their home nations, not even to other host nations. We read of internal trafficking in the novel of Ajaegbo under the guise of getting a better life for the trafficked women. We have studied the selected novels through the lenses of feminism to as to highlight core issues of sexual abuse, female objectification and exploitation raised in the novels. This had therefore brought to the fore the ugly experiences of the young women as shown in the novel.

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