

LITERATURE AS THE MIRROR OF THE SOCIETY: THE CASE OF CHILD ABUSE IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Child abuse has become a global problem. Children are most times abused by people who are supposed to love, cherish and protect them. Children face the menace of abuse ranging from physical injuries, abandonment, sexual abuse to child labour. The society seems to be silent about it except for few like the creative writers who write from what is obtained in their society. Many writers examine the ordeals of children in many societies and how these abuses affect these children. This paper discusses the prevalence of child abuse as reported in literary works. It mirrors the Nigerian society and the Nigerian child using the works of few Nigerian authors. It also dwells on the consequences if these abuses are allowed to continue

Introduction

Children are the most vulnerable individuals of the society. A child is born helpless and defenceless meant to be protected, loved, cherished and cared for by parents, care givers and adults. This is not the case in many societies though as many of them suffer different kinds of abuses from people they trust to give them the protection, love and security they so badly needed. Children are exposed to different kinds of violations including physical, psychological, sexual and emotional abuses, rendering the most peaceful stage of life troubled and traumatic.

On 23rd July 2016, Nigerians woke up to the shocking story of a nine year old boy Torede Taiwo all over the news and social media. The boy was chained neck and legs and locked with heavy padlocks like an animal by his father Francis Taiwo for over a month. He was beaten, left alone, and barely fed. At his rescue, he was almost dying of starvation and could barely stand. He was put into that inhuman condition by his father because according to him the boy stole a piece of meat from his soup pot. This happened in a church compound in Ota area of Ogun state where he claimed to be pastor. (www.vanguardngr.com)

Another story is told of One Mrs. Roseline Uzoamaka in FCT Abuja who forced a thirteen year old girl to sit on a burning electric cooker until she sustained severe burns in her private parts as a punishment for urinating on the bed. This incident was reported on 23rd August 2014. (www.leadership.ng)

Stories of children being molested, raped and maltreated by their supposed care giver is now so common that it is sometimes treated with mere shaking of the head. It is heart breaking and unfortunate that these stories are often taken over by events and most of the perpetrators go scot free. Majority of cases of abuse are not ever reported.

Child Abuse

Abuse in children is the physical, sexual or psychological mistreatment or neglect of a child or children, especially by a parent or caregiver. The CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 defines child abuse as “Any recent act of failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation”. Edu and Edu (1999) describe child abuse as “a wilful maltreatment of a child. Such maltreatment can include acts of commission (abuse) and omission (neglect)”. Nseabasi and Abiodun (2010) narrowed the definition of child abuse as “life threatening physical violence, including severe beatings, burns and strangulation which are inflicted on children by adults members of the community”

A new report by the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF(2002) states that many Nigerian children suffer violent abuses. The report says that for some kids, the abuse starts before their fifth birthday. It says that six out of ten children experience some form of violence before they turn eighteen, with half of them experiencing physical violence. Others are abused emotionally or sexually. The violence starts young, over half of children were abused before the age of eleven, and one in ten were abused before they turned five. This is a very disturbing scenario.

Another common form of child abuse after physical violence is child labour. Wells. K (2009) defines children as young human beings between birth and puberty, they are people considered not to be legally responsible. It is thus very disturbing to see children being saddled with demands and challenges they are not emotionally and mentally ready for.

It is not uncommon to see children working to take care of adults whose duty is to take care of them. This is child labour and child labour is sabotage against childhood. The American Heritage Dictionary (2013) defines child labour as "the employment of children, particularly under terms and conditions considered inhuman or prohibited by law". Webster Dictionary (2010) also defines child labour as "the regular, full time employment of child under a legally defined age in factories, stores, offices etc". Drumbl. (2002) defines child labour as work that is mentally, physically, socially and morally dangerous and harmful to children and deprives them the opportunities for schooling and development. Children who are meant to be provided for are turned and used to be bread winners and providers of the family. This is a common phenomenon in most third world countries and it is not farfetched from extreme poverty, community violence, state oppression, warfare and family disintegration in most third world societies.

Child labour remains a major source of concern in Nigeria, in spite of legislative measures. According to the international labour organisation, (2012) the number of working children under the age of fourteen in Nigeria is estimated at fifteen million. The high level of diverse tedious jobs that children execute in dangerous circumstances is worrying. With the current economic situation in the country; it has become very common to see children being used to make extra income for the family. In most cases, they are the sole earners and the adults depend on their sweat to feed. It is not uncommon to see children working in construction sites, hawking on the street and worse still turned into sex workers during school hours. They are not just denied education which is a basic necessity of life, but they are exposed to different street hazards which most times they are victims.

Child Abuse in Literature

Child abuse has given most well-meaning members of the society causes to worry especially the literary artists and writers. Most writers carry the burden of laying bare the ills of the society using creative imagination. It is not surprising though that literary works treat these issues as Literature is the mirror in which the society is viewed. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1982) rightly puts it that "literature does not grow in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and area of concern by social and economic forces in a particular society". This lends credence to the fact that literature draws from human experiences in order to give true reflection of the realities of the society. Ngugiwa (1982) sees the novel "like the myth and parables that gives a view of the society from its contemplation of social line, reflecting it, mirror-like but also reflecting upon it simultaneously".

Literature as a creative activity projects those deeply ingrained and relatively enduring patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour of the society from which it is drawn. Apparently, literature captures the diverse forms of interaction between various parts of a society and its people. Mary

Kolawole (2005) corroborates this assertion, as she suggests that: literature is not only an imitation of life, but also a concept which derives from certain sustainable principles. A multifaceted relationship therefore exists between literature and society, and the diverse conceptualizations of the relationship remain overt. The varying emphases on social art, therefore, make literature of great importance, as it transcends mere entertainment to expose the significant moral and social views of the writer and of his environment which form the nexus for his art.(9) Alberto, in Demeterio (2001), is also of the view that: Literature is a social institution”, which is “created by the writer, who is a member of the society. Its medium is language, which is a social creation. It represents life, which is a social reality. It is addressed to men who form a social body. It is centrally conditioned by social and other forces and, in turn, exerts social influence (11)

African literature constantly reflects an attempt at narrating the African experience and their struggles. The African writer and his craft predictably continue to rise to the challenge of remaining committed to his community in the face of diverse socio-political instabilities and the contending trend of modernisation. The African writer not only probes, but also responds to the yearning of his environment. Specifically, contemporary Nigerian prose fiction continues to witness a tremendous emergence of literary works marked by diverse degrees of creative innovation and experimentation.

The works of writers constitute potential sources for analysis of social theory and at this point, the contemporary African writer reflect the plight of the children in their fiction most times using child narrators and protagonist to reflect troubled and abused childhood. These writers draw on what Madelaine Hron identifies as the rich literary tradition of “adopting the child focaliser” (qtd in Edger 2013).

Child abuses have received extensive attention in Nigerian writings in the last three decades. Writers use fiction to explore the experiences children in abusive domestic places, as commoditised sex objects in poor urban cities, in wartime and child work. The writers portray children’s sufferings and recognise the sites, agents, conditions and institution that form the intricate infrastructure of child violation. These depictions focus readers’ attention on what a child undergo, see, and struggle with, in the society.

In *Purple Hibiscus* (2004).Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie allows her silenced but precocious fifteen-year-old protagonist a form of articulation to disclose the violent disciplining in her middle class home. Adichie creates for her a convincing grammar to speak about domestic abuse. Narrated through Kambili’s first-person perspective, the novel depicts Eugene’s violent disciplining of his family when they transgress his distorted interpretation of ideal religious conduct.

Adichie’s novel suggests that Eugene’s violently heavy handed parenting style can partly be read as a re-enactment of his own upbringing. There are striking similarities between Eugene’s abuse as a child, and his current enactment of similar patterns of abuse on his children. As a student at the Catholic school, St. Gregory, Eugene was cured‘of masturbation by a priest who poured boiling water on his hands. Years later, the adult Eugene, now a father to two children, administers the same boiling-water punishment to his daughter’s feet and legs as punishment for staying under the same roof as a heathen ‘her own grandfather (Eugene’s unchristian father) against Eugene’s wishes: [Papa] lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. He was crying now, tears streaming down his face. I saw the moist stream before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. (194)

Eugene's form of punishment in disciplining his own family by targeting the offending parts of the body indicates how his childhood abuse resurfaces and is re-enacted in his adulthood. The sombre manner in which he dispenses this punishment is particularly striking. This is further illustrated when he breaks Jaja's hand for failing to be the top student in his Holy Communion class:

When he was ten, [Jaja] had missed two questions on his catechism test and was not named the best in his First Holy Communion class. Papa took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right..... (145)

Eugene's insistence on his son maintaining the top position in the Holy Communion class underscores his obsession with public demonstration of Catholic piety. It is his need to publicly demonstrate his family's righteousness that regularly leads to the abuse of his children. Though he is aware of the terrible trauma he inflicts on his son, his deluded belief in the righteousness of his action makes him administer the punishment. He blindly believes in his divine responsibility to uphold God's law rigidly in his home by ensuring that any transgression from his notion of absolute piety is punished.

Uwem "Ex-mas Feast" (2008) though set in the Kenyan capital Nairobi depicts a typical Nigerian scene; it concerns a starving Machokosh family and its economic dependence on its eldest (twelve-year-old) daughter. This family is reflected in how it exploits its children for survival. The different forms of exploitation to which the children are subjected are subtly highlighted by the protagonist's anguished bewilderment at the way his parents use his pre-teen sister's prostitution as a source of income. The depiction of this boy's anguish at his sister's exploitation questions the shameless ease with which some parents yield to the temptation of making easy money by tapping into the country's sex economy. Using Jigana's perceptive and empathetic gaze, Akpan exposes the extent to which child prostitution is attributable to how a financially desperate family yields callously to the terrible pressures of urban poverty to turn a child into a marketable commodity. The parents' willingness to subsist on their children's suffering is underscored by Akpan's layered irony in punning the story's title: "An Ex-mas Feast". Corruption of Christmas symbolism is reflected in how the parents label the food and Jigana's school fees obtained from Maisha's prostitution a Christmas feast. Their readiness to survive by means of their daughter's degradation reduces Christmas with its religious connotations of celebration and treasuring of children ironically, to an anti-Christmas parody and blasphemy that feasts on the successful selling of a child into sexual slavery or turning her prematurely into what the family's ten-year-old daughter Naema euphemistically calls a breadwinner.

Uwem (2008) also uses fiction in his short story "My Parent's Bedroom" to explore the targeting of a young girl for rape and the victim's response to such violation. Set in rural Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, Akpan's text employs a child focaliser Monique. When a mob led by Monique's paternal uncle attacks her home, in search of her mother, Monique is sexually attacked as a substitute for her mother. Still struggling to make sense of what is happening around her, the violated, traumatised girl is later forced to escape with her brother after her father is forced to kill her mother, who is figured as an enemy, due to her Tutsi ethnicity. Nine-year-old Monique has to try and make sense of her world, which is turned into a nightmare by the genocides and violence around her.

Another form of abuse against children is the full participation of children in crises especially by insurgents and terrorists. Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, and Chris Abani's *Song for Night* give a horrid picture of children conscripted to fight in wars. Children are either been violently abducted or coerced into volunteering to serve as soldiers in wars. Not only are they

forced to witness war and its atrocities, but they are drawn into these conflicts as participants. These child soldiers perform a range of tasks including participation in combat, laying land-mines and explosives, scouting, spying, acting as couriers or guards, pottering, carrying out domestic chores such as cooking and the worst being held under sexual slavery thus missing out on the safe childhood which every child is entitled to.

Conclusion

The creative writer does not just lay bare the ills of the society but also foresee the consequences of these ills. The abuse of children from the above treated texts indicate that we are sitting on a gun powder and something must be done fast. Cases of child abuse must not be treated with kid gloves as children who are physically abused tend to grow up to abuse other children or find it difficult to adjust as normal adults in the society. Children who are saddled with responsibilities they are not physically and mentally ready to handle tend to go into crime or prostitution to meet up with the demands on them. They end up being burden to society as most of them lack the education and skill to properly fit into the society. A child, who has been used to fight war, ends up harbouring hatred thus exposing the society to future war.

If we all agree with the creative writers that children are the future generation and the leaders of tomorrow then child abuse must be tackled head on. Writers are of the view that it is not just a problem for the government to handle alone but the government has an upper hand in this struggle. They must stand on their toes to see that those who abuse children and deny them the freedom and the joy of their childhood are prosecuted. This will serve as a deterrent to others.

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