

Review

Corruption among academics: An example of Akachi-Adimora Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

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It is unfortunate to note that citadels of learning from where decorum and morality ought to diffuse to the larger society have been deleteriously affected by the seemingly insurmountable challenge of corruption. Oftentimes, politicians and political leaders are castigated for high-rate of corruption by academics, whereas, the so-called castigators themselves are not exonerated from this social malady. It is, therefore, the case of the pot calling the kettle black. Instead of choosing to be a different kettle of fish, academics have joined the enemy of the people in compounding their already unbearable pains. Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* has been examined mostly from gender perspective, while the other major issue of corruption has not been adequately dealt with. It is against the foregoing, therefore, that this paper investigates corrupt practices among academics as depicted in *Trafficked*. The paper is aimed at exploring the epidemics of corruption among academics. Postcolonial theory is adopted, while the examined text is subject to critical textual analysis. It is observed that Adimora-Ezeigbo diagnoses the effect of corruption in academia as it affects students, the nation and education system. Taking of bribery, making and selling of not-well-researched hand-outs, molestation and maltreatment of students form parts of the corrupt practices as portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: Corruption, academics, education sector, Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Trafficked*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary African literature has enthusiastically dwelt so much on issues relating to human condition, history and political landscape of the cultural milieu in which those literary works are set. Hence, the social commitment of the contemporary African artists (writers) cannot be overstressed. This synchronises with Achebe's (1975) position that artists live and move and have their being in society, and create their works for the good of the society.

Breyten Breytenbach (2007:166) describes a writer and sums up his social responsibilities in the following words: ...he is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society...he is also

the exponent of the aspirations of his people. In the poor and colonized countries (like Nigeria) the writer plays a more visible role: faced with acute social and economic iniquities he is called upon to articulate the dreams and the demands of his people...And from this flows the impossibility of the writer ever fitting in completely with any orthodoxy. Sooner or later he is going to be in discord with the politicians.

Therefore, it is not possible for a responsible writer not to write in the interest of the cultural milieu. In the opinion of Terry Eagleton (1977), a writer does not need to foist his own political views on his work because, if he reveals the real and potential forces *objectively* at work in a

situation, he is already in that sense partisan. Partisanship is inherent in reality itself; it emerges in a method of treating social reality rather than in a subjective attitude towards it. In other words, writers should objectively present issues as they relate to society without being biased.

Many people involved in education systems – from the uppermost echelons right down to the school level – are confronted by corrupt practices at some stage. The phenomenon is not new; yet until a decade ago research rarely focused on it. There may be several explanations for this. First of all, the issue of corruption emerged only recently on the international agenda with the adoption of the OECD's 1999 Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions and the adoption of the 2003 United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC). In addition to this, those involved in the education sector have been reluctant to tackle the issue of corruption – perhaps because they fear that this might tarnish the image of the sector and therefore, reduce the resources allocated to it (Muriel Poisson, 2010). Inability to tackle and nip corruption in the bud has led to its torrential growth in education sector, especially among academics. Corruption occurs at all levels in universities.

Contrary to the Eurocentric belief that the blacks are the most corrupt, there is nowhere corrupt practices are not being perpetrated nowadays. In a study jointly carried-out by Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson (2007) in Georgia (USA), they observe that widespread misconduct affects university examinations, the conferring of academic credentials, the procurement of goods and services, and the licensing and accreditation of institutions. More so, it is now accepted that academic fraud and corrupt practices involve a variety of stakeholders, including examination candidates, teachers, faculty members, supervisors, officials and employees of examination authorities, in addition to managers of courses, programmes, institutions and universities. Entities in charge of quality assurance and accreditation are also susceptible to corrupt practices, which is even more worrisome. Within this context, and given the complexity and diversity of the trends described above, it is extremely difficult to produce a comprehensive list of all opportunities for academic fraud (Hallak and Poisson 2007). All these unwholesome practices have made the erstwhile corruption-free academic world lose its serenity and respect.

Omotola (2007) unmistakably maintains that corruption is one of the most topical issues in the discourses of the deepening crisis and contradictions of post-independence Nigeria. The level of attention devoted to it may not only be due to its rapid and unprecedented expansion to all facet of human endeavour and its menacing consequences, but also because of the seeming

fecklessness of successive attempts at combating it. Like an unchecked inferno, this social challenge has spread to virtually every sphere of the polity. There is no longer a grey area for corruption; even the usually venerated religious institution has been dragged into the messy mud of corruption.

Mu'Azu Babangida Aliyu (2008:10-11) argues against the usual criticism of the political class as being the only one culpable when talking about corruption. He declares that:

“...when we talk of corruption in our polity, we would be unfair to ascribe it only as a phenomenon of the political class or the town, for we are all living witnesses to all of corrupt and immoral acts taking place in the gown, from extortion, admission racketeering, sexual abuse, examination malpractices to cultism, jealousy and unhealthy rivalry often perpetuated by highly placed members of the academia. Other forms include absenteeism, intellectual laziness and lack of concentration on research”.

As a matter of fact, Aliyu (2008), in the foregoing, adequately enumerates various acts of corruption ravaging the nation's citadels of learning. Although the political class is known for its notoriety in corruption, the academia has joined in this cancerous social menace. Nigerian writers clinically attend to their nation's socio-politico-economic illness though through textual diagnosis. This further establishes writers' social commitment to the plight of their milieu.

Ayo Kehinde (2005:338) submits that:

“The modern (Nigerian) novel is an attempt to confront reality in a period of change, an effort to foreground the disagreement among writers on the old side and those pleading for the new. This gives rise to definite experimentation with content and form. The modern novel has a tone of disillusionment; it is signified by the post-world war philosophy of existentialism which is marked by alienation, despair, cruelty, absurdity, urban terrorism, crime, pain, dissonance, espionage, poverty, dislocation, disintegration, famine, frustration, anarchy, atheism, misogyny, misanthropy, betrayal, nihilism and all forms of anomie”.

Kehinde (2005) is therefore, of the opinion that, if there is anything special in the modern novel, it is the fact that it is fraught with the issue of pains. It dwells on the social disorder, injustice and human failures and frailties.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is one of Nigeria's most illustrious writers and role models. Her first work of fiction for young readers, *The Buried Treasure*, was published by Heinemann of UK in 1992. Since then, she has been making significant and incomparable contribution to literature by writing novels, short stories, and children's books. But long before these feats, she was appointed as

a lecturer in 1981 at the University of Lagos and became a Professor of English in 1999. She was declared one of the two winners in the NLNG Prize for Literature for her children's novel *My Cousin Sammy* in 2007. Another novel, *House of Symbols*, won four medals. Two of her books were short listed for the ANA Prize this year, one of which (*Heart Songs*) won the Cadbury Prize for Poetry. On top of all that, she is one of the most visible gender and feminist writers, theorists and critics in Nigeria today. Published in 2008, *Trafficked* is preoccupied with the issue of human trafficking. However, this paper attempts to examine the inadequately researched issue of corruption which is prevalent in the novel (<http://www.akachiezeigbo.org>, accessed 22/01/2014).

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At its birth, postcolonial theory was introduced as reactionary movement to challenge colonial perceptions, practices and discourses on the colonised subject. One of the foremost proponents of the theory, Bhabha (1992) opines that postcolonial criticism bears witness to the uneven and unequal forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Lately, however, postcolonial critics' attention has shifted from attacking external forces to looking inward. This is because the enemy within proves more dangerous than erstwhile external forces (colonialists). Fanon (1963) examines a deep chasm between the people in the countryside and the national bourgeoisie in the urban areas whose members fill the former colonial bureaucracies and enjoy the fruits of Western-style corruption. Postcolonial theory addresses various oddities, such as corruption, in postcolonial society. The selected text is subject to critical textual analysis in order to bring to the fore instances of corruption among the academics in the novel.

Diagnosis of Corruption among Academics in *Trafficked*

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Nigerian society is one in which bribery, corruption, misappropriation of public funds, graft, nepotism, power drunkenness and criminal disregard for the wishes and aspirations of the struggling masses are firmly rooted without being properly checked and controlled.

As a University don, Adimora-Ezeigbo is not unaware of the high-rate corruption and moral decadence in academics, especially, among the lecturers. It is ironical that those who are supposed to instigate and institute positive changes in the society have joined the enemies of the people in the game of corruption and

(s)exploitation. The novelist, through the story of Ofomata, a man to whom Nneoma, the heroine of the narrative, is betrothed before her sudden disappearance from Ihite-Agu, establishes the theme of corruption in academia. Ofomata has deserted his father's lucrative palm-oil mill and palm kernel cracking industries in Ihite-Agu in order to pursue a degree in Estate Management at the Lagos University of Science and Technology. He is, however, faced with challenges beyond his control. He approaches Dr. Rafiu Komolafe to submit an assignment. Before Dr. Komolafe could collect the assignment from Ofomata, he asks him "can you get me some tyres for my Volvo? I need at least two" (32). However, before Dr. Komolafe allows Ofomata to come in to his office, he has to keep him waiting for hours. This is an example of how some academics treat their students as though they are animals. At another instance, Dr. Komolafe also asks Ofomata to get him a jerry can of fuel as though he is his employer. Although Ofomata would have retorted, he is afraid of being failed by the lecturer because he takes him (Ofomata) two courses. Therefore, non-compliance with his request means that he risks his chances of passing Komolafe's courses.

Politics of alienation ravages virtually every nook and cranny of the nation. It is not an unknown fact that those students who do not have *long legs* would find it very difficult to get accommodation on campus. Meanwhile, lecturers' children and wards get bed space even though they would not stay in the hostel. As Ofomata sits down forlornly, his heart ruminates over irregularities that have crept into the academic world:

Why should lecturers' children whose families lived on campus be given accommodation in the hostels, thus depriving needy students of bed spaces? (33).

This victim of academic corruption and indiscipline is not given official accommodation; he has to buy a bed space at an exorbitant price from a final year student, who has been allocated the bed space but does not need it since his father is a professor. Indigent students are maltreated as though they do not have the moral right to be educated. This is as a result of the laxity in instilling moral and humanity in the up-coming generation. Politics of man-know-man has become the order of the day even in the nation's citadels of learning.

In addition, one Mr. Ogamba asks for a loan of fifty thousand naira (₦50,000.00) from Ofomata though Ofomata is never sure if he would ever pay the money back. As a matter of fact, academics seem to have lost their sense of reasoning as they prey on their students whose pains and burdens they are supposed to cushion.

Moreover, students are compelled to buy sheets of paper stapled together in the name of hand-outs. Some of the books sold to students are shoddily produced and

lack substance as they are not well-researched. Unfortunately, the students have no choice; they either buy the *papers* or choose to fail the courses. Ofomata is affected by the gamut of crises in the country.

Academics are not alone in the perpetration of corrupt practices on campus; it is far more common among non-academic staff. Non-academics devise means of looting and duping unsuspecting students. Ofomata recalls a night when some night-partying students disturb everyone in the hostel through noise. According to Ofomata:

“Was the porter deaf? Why hadn’t he gone to stop the noise? Perhaps the boys had bribed him with money. It was not only lecturers that milked students. People in administration did it too. One of the secretaries had recently been accused of collecting illegal fees from students” (103).

He is surprised that the porter on duty ought to have challenged the disturbing students. When he looks for him, he could not find him in the porter’s lodge, he later finds him in a corner busy drinking beer. Students are usually compelled to pay unauthorised fees without any receipt to show for it by non-teaching staff. Without mincing words, all these actions have destroyed the image of academic world. Lamenting over the effect of corruption in Nigeria, Achebe (1983:58) declares that corruption “has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage; and Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed”.

The concept of “African Time” is a serious challenge in the society today. Punctuality has become a thing of the past as people perennially get late to places of appointment. This is the case of the Vice Chancellor, Professor Ojo Johnson, who comes late to the senate meeting and walks in without any sense of shame or remorsefulness. According to the narrator:

“I’m sorry for being late,” he said cheerfully, nothing in his face to show he was contrite. It looked as if the apology was meant to ‘fulfill all righteousness’, as the saying went on campus (141).

This social realist writer uses the VC to represent members of the high echelon in institution of learning who have lost their senses of morality and respect. It can be said that the erosion of immorality now flows from the gown to the town whereas it should be the other way round. University should be the centre of morality where young minds and future leaders are properly baked.

Unless proactive steps are taken to curb all these unspeakable (in)actions among the academics, the larger society is not safe. In the narrative under examination, certain measures are employed to check excesses of the academics. Following several petitions against bad eggs among the academics, school authority sets up a committee to investigate allegations against Dr. Komolafe and Dr. Pepple. However, before now, Dr. Komolafe has

already been under police interrogation; he is arrested by the police for gross misconduct. An influential student sets a trap for Komolafe which later catches him. He demands fifty thousand naira from the student and threatens to fail him should he refuse to bring the money. The student informs his father who relays the matter to the police. As the student offers him the money, the police are already around and catch him red-handed.

Dr. Okehi cites other instance of indiscipline among academics, especially male as they sexually harass female students. Ashaolu (1986) posits that the socio-political situation in Africa today, more than ever before, vindicates the apocalyptic vision of African creative writers as projected through their characters. Considering the present predicaments which have bedevilled the human race recently, writers tend to exhibit despondency. They see the future of humanity as one of destruction and extinction as long as corruption and the divisive factors continue to take root and spread unchecked. Meanwhile, it is in a view to redeeming the future that writers make effort to explore various negative tendencies in society.

As the news of Komolafe’s arrest gets to Ofomata, he feels elated because “at least it meant that one of his headaches had been removed” (148). The situation here is unfortunate; lecturers are supposed to be solution to students’ problem. Through corruption and indiscipline, academics constitute headache to their students. Enthralled by unchecked corrupt practices among academics, Edna, Ofomata’s colleague, muses: “how wonderful it will be if the police arrest all the corrupt staff at the university and if the students’ union is allowed to send representatives to senate. And if the increase in accommodation fees is cancelled” (150). However, although Edna’s suggested wishes sound good, it is not without impossibility. Police is a major corrupt (para) military force in the nation today. There have been various accusations against the Nigerian police for taking bribery, instituting brutality and conniving with political class to unleash terror and pains on the suffering masses. Thus, it would be an aberration for this kind of police to have the effrontery to arrest corrupt academics.

Therefore, before Nigerian police can go out and effectively carryout their responsibility, they must look inward and remove the plank out of their own eyes. The so-called students’ representatives have become compromise through their collusion with the school authority to institute anti-student policy on campus. Students’ union leaders only represent their own pockets; this equates them with the politicians in the nation.

Furthermore, another instance of corruption noted among the academics in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* is the purchase of promotion. The chairman of the Committee Investigating the Allegation of Misconduct against Dr. Edmund Pepple, Professor Okalla, gets his

professorship not as a reward for industry and academic excellence but a payment made by the government for spying on his radical colleagues. This is rather common during military rule in the country. Politicisation of promotion is one of the banes of academic excellence in the nation's education sector.

Following legal proceedings, Dr. Komolafe is eventually sentenced to nine months imprisonment and his appointment is also terminated. In the same vein, the committee on Dr. Pepple recommends his sack as a strong reprimand for being a 'pebble' to the academic profession.

Though grievous, the punishments meted out on these corrupt academics would go a long way in serving as a deterrent to other academics that may be doing the same thing in secret.

Corruption at whatever level in human society can be prevented. This, however, depends on good leadership in citadel of learning. Aliyu (2008:9) laments the present situation of education sector:

Indeed, I truly believe that our major problem in this country is the problem of leadership; that is, the lack of genuine, visionary and committed leadership. My heart bleeds when I compare what our educational system has become with what existed in the past, when I recall that in our days some of us were paid to go to and to remain in school, while others had their education paid for them by public funds through the foresight and selflessness of our past political heroes like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief Nnamdi Azikiwe and Sir Ahmadu Bello, among others. Then our Certificates and students were accepted and respected all over the world. Our Professors were sought after by the most prestigious Universities the world over. Alas, things are different today.

What Aliyu (2008) offers above is a rather sad history of the glorious past. That was the time when political class and academics strongly held on to their responsibility and united to secure a virile future for the coming generation through the provision of an enviable education. It is, however, disheartening that the same class of people, who enjoyed good (free) education when the nation's education sector had not lost its glory, are responsible for *killing* the sector today through corrupt practices and bad policies. Osundare (2007:23) corroborates unfortunate high-rate moral and intellectual decadence among the academics when laments the fact that people now live on campus like 'conquered people: conquered, that is, by decay and decadence, by the warped values and chronic anomalies in the outside Nigerian society. Far from being the trail-blazers we are expected to be, we have become blaze-trailers'.

CONCLUSION

The relevance of this fictionalisation of reality is that,

authority must take pragmatic measures in curbing this social malady which has crept in to the academic sector. Adimora-Ezeigbo, through this narrative, depicts unbridled widespread of corruption among the academics. Through this literary surgery of her society, she seeks immediate solution to the carnivorous challenge which forms the nitty-gritty of this study. Considering the cautionary response of Adimora-Ezeigbo to society-threatening challenge like corruption, Nigerian writers have written much on human condition (Aduke Adebayo, 2010). They have been able to draw attention to the past of slavery, feudalism and colonialism and the present which is characterised by post-independence disillusionment, corruption, kidnapping, violence, leadership ineptitude and poor condition. This paper, therefore, emphasises the need for quick down-to-business steps towards restoring normalcy to the academia. Since no writer write in vacuum, Adimora-Ezeigbo must have been informed by the reality in her milieu. However, the essence of writing about anomalies in human society is to find lasting solution to such challenges. Writers are, therefore, *righters*.

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