Exploitation and Girl-Child Abuse versus African Humanity Claims: A Study of Darko’s *Faceless* and El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*

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**Abstract**
Exploitation and abuse of the minors, especially girl-children who, unwittingly and most unfortunately, find themselves either in the ghetto or street, is forcefully becoming a regular menace ravaging African societies. This situation arose given the victims’ socio-economic background which renders them ‘prey’ to some morally depraved adults, including their trusted relations, who take undue advantage of their vulnerability. This work explored the observed phenomena using Amma Darko’s *Faceless* and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* to examine the extent of the exploitation and abuse of the victims and the consequent damages on their lives right from childhood. The study equally examined the aftermath of this ugly trend on the society at large. For the purpose of this work, this study focused it search within the framework of the much proclaimed ‘African humanity,’ as well as underline how this lofty ideal is contradicted by abuse of the girl-children in African societies of today.

**Key words:** Exploitation, Abuse, African humanity.
Introduction
Patriarchy is the social system structurally constructed by men. It is “the social system where men are the primary authority figure and their decisions are central to social organization. In this system, women are not accorded much recognition; they are seen as suzerain to be owned, either by the father, an uncle or a husband. Patriarchy has invented women in its own terms as unworthy of social relevance; in this patrimony, women occupy the object position, and are denied subjectivity by the males who control them. Patriarchy leads to gender inequality and the subordination of women, to the extent that women cannot even control their own sexuality…. (David Mallaili 281)

African humanity, to my understanding, aims at interrogating the concept of ‘humanity’ and its delineation as it concerns Africa. It intends to explore the personhood of the African, man and woman inclusive. The search for the understanding of African humanity would address such issues as: What is humanity? Who is a human being? What is African conception of humanity?

We may try to understand the concept of humanity by first examining the second question: Who is a human being? A human being simply put is a human person that exists in the present world. In other words, world-presencing plays a major role in understanding the concept. Existence here connotes “a state of being in virtue ‘of which a being is present as an actuality and not merely as possibility, distinct from the mind, and if it be a produced being, distinct from its producing cause” (Nwankwo in Iroegbu 332). Iroegbu further states that: existence means that which is in reality or which has true, actual being. It is that which we see and
touch or know to be here or there or somewhere else. What makes this reality is the act of existing, its perfection, ‘concrescence’. It is what makes a thing be in reality, from not-being to being. In other words, from nothing to something. (333)

Having done that, we now go back to the first question: What is humanity? Humanity could be seen as being a human person, to exist in human nature and with human characteristics, such as being humane; ability to attend to human affairs, to exhibit kindness, affection, and fairness in dealings with both animals and other human beings. This can be taken as standard conception of human being. Descriptively, the human being is a rational being standing as the specific difference within the classification of animality.

Furthermore, we examine the African conceptualization of humanity. African humanity directly reflects African communalism which elaborates communal living. It ethically details common ownership of both persons and material things; a father/mother in a kindred is a father/mother to every child in that kindred and the training of every child is everyone’s responsibility. It is a system in which every member’s affair becomes every body’s affair. While elucidating on African communalism Obi Oguejiofor states that:

   communalism could be understood as the primacy of the community over the individual. It is the governance or social relationship in which the claims of the individual generally take the second seat before the demands and claims of the community. In the words of Augustine Shutte,
Communalism is a kind of socialism, but it is not European socialism. It is rather 'an up-dating of the traditional emphasis on community as ethical and religious ideal…. Communalism implies above all, equality of life made possible by common attitudes and loyalties.’ (6, Emphasis mine).

Oguejiofor’s efforts in exposing the meaning of African communism led him to explore the stances and delineations of the concept by some notable pan-Africanists and nationalists such as Kwame Nkruma, John S. Mbiti, Leonard Senghor, Chukwuma Okolo, Julius Nyerere, Egbeka Aja and others.

Nkruma, according to Oguejiofor, saw communalist society as that “in which each saw his well-being in the welfare of the group” and of which spirit “crystalized in its humanism and its reconciliation of individual advancement with group welfare” (10). Nkruma further underlines the humanist legacy of African communalism where ‘… each man should be guaranteed equal opportunity for his development”. (Oguejiofor 10-11) With reference to Mbiti, Oguejiofor noted his popular African saying: “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am”. (9) Senghor is of the view that Africans are emotional beings who have “natural feeling of oneness”. (9) Nyerere’s theory of Ujamaa finds its stronghold on familyhood. Family being the nucleus of the society, for him, becomes the force of African communism. Everyone’s survival depends on the survival of every member of the family. Nyerere states that “in our traditional African society we are individuals within a community. We took care of the community and the community took care of us. We neither needed nor wished to exploit our fellow men”. (Oguejiofor 12)
In all, the conceptualization of African communalism revolves around common care, justice, integrity and trust that engender common good. It is this feeling of common goodness that culminates into what Wiredu describes as being “… not only compatible with golden rule but are analogous to it.” (6)

**Brief Background Information on the Two Novels and the Authors**

This paper studies El Sadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* and Amma Darko’s *Faceless with* the intent to explore the so much proclaimed African humanity using the lives and experiences of the girl-children in the two novels as yard stick to measure African humanity as an ideal and how it reflects in the characters in the novels.

The two novels were written by two African women: *Woman at Point Zero*, by Nawal El Saadawi, a fierce radical female writer of Egyptian descent. In this novel, she forcefully and blatantly exposes the almost space less and inhuman position of the Egyptian woman and by extension of all African woman as she is inhumanly subjected to cruel sexual abuse of all kinds, assaulted and battered by her own kin: father, uncle, husband and other men. Even as a prostitute which her societal conditions led her into, she has no right over her sexuality. El Sadaawi artfully unfolds the aftermath of the girl-child’s dehumanization, devaluation and deprivation of her personhood. In *Faceless*, Amma Darko, a Ghanaian writer equally demonstrates a gloomy social reality of children (mostly girls) “abandoned to the streets, each of them has had to grow up rather quickly into the ways of the world in order to take up for themselves those responsibilities on which their parents have turned their backs” (Swarthmore xxvi), and in
the process were also brutally sexually abused by trusted relations, neighbors and friends of their parents.

Given the number of years between the publications of the two books: *Woman at Point Zero*, 1975 and *Faceless*, 2013, one expects anything but sameness of theme and purpose by the two authors on exposing the predicaments and perditions, of pains and agonies, of disappointments and frustrations, of woes and sorrows, and of defamation and defilement of the African girl-children. These are indications of persistence of the menace of female subjugation, exploitation, abuse and the consistent denial of ownership of own sexuality by girl-children in African society.

*Woman at Point Zero* was set on an unyielding patriarchal background. An “Islamic stiff cultural background where religion plays a dominant role in the lives of people and ethical norms and behavior are upheld or repudiated according to perceived religious tenets”. (Emenyonu 214) *Faceless*, on the other hand, has a setting of Christian background with a not too stiff cultural setting. It was rather some kind of the squalid realities of the ghetto which allowed the government a great element of detachment and negligence resulting to a state of complete helplessness, hopelessness and lawlessness in the ghetto community aptly named Sodom and Gomorrah. The police, for example lack any infrastructure to investigate a murder case and some of their officials, out of frustration, resorting to playing lotto during office hours.

*Faceless* is a work of imaginative fiction. Not so with *Woman at Point Zero* which is a true life story of Firdaus, the protagonist. The author informs her reader on the first page of the novel that:
this is a story of a real woman. I met her in Qanatir Prison a few years ago…. The prison doctor told me that this woman had been sentenced to death for killing a man. Yet she was not like the other female murderers held in the prison ‘You will never meet anyone like her in or out of prison. (El Saawawi 1)

From the outset of the novel, we meet Firdaus, a woman of determination and obstinacy born out of bitterness and frustration against her society that traumatised and tortured her as long as she lived.

African Communalism and Girl-child Abuse and Exploitation

Earlier, we noted that African communalism proclaims “natural feeling of oneness” and in Julius Nyerere’s theory of Ujamaa, the family is the basis for societal oneness. He insists that “in our traditional African society we are individuals within a community. We took care of the community and the community took care of us. We neither needed nor wished to exploit our fellow men”. Likewise, Bell Hooks stated that in Africa “family ties are the support system for exploited and oppressed people (38). However, these statements are doubtful given the experiences of Firdaus, the protagonist of Woman at Point Zero and that of Fofo and Baby T in Faceless .

Sadaawi uses Firdaus’s family to reveal instances of exploitation of Firdaus by her uncle when she was just a child. While Firdaus innocently squatted on the ground with the trough between her legs, her *galabeya* often slipped up her thighs, her uncle’s hand will move:
slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. Every time there was the sound of a footstep at the entrance to our house, his hand would withdraw quickly. But whenever everything around us lapsed into silence, broken only every now and then by snap of dry twigs between my fingers as I fed the oven, and the sound of his regular breathing reaching me from behind the book so that I could not tell whether he was snoring quietly in his sleep or wide awake and panting, his hand would continue to press against my thigh with grasping, almost brutal insistence. (13)

Eventually, her uncle takes her to Cairo to live with him where, for the first time, she is sent to school. In return for this favour his uncle continues to abuse her sexually, now without restrictions, as Firdaus has become his ward living alone with him. He takes her to cinema at that tender age to watch naked women after which he takes advantage of her again. Here is Firdaus experience:

When I was awarded my primary school certificate he bought me a wristwatch, and that night took me to the cinema. I saw a woman dancing. Her thighs were naked. And I saw a man hugging a woman. And I saw a man hugging a woman…. I was trembling all over, seized with a feeling I could not explain, that my uncle’s great long fingers would draw close to me after a little while, and cautiously lift the eidendo under which I lay. Then his lips would touch my face and press down on my mouth, and his trembling fingers
would feel their way slowly upwards over my thighs. (21)

After Firdaus’s secondary education she went back to continue living with her now married uncle. The wife is obviously intolerant of her in the house and plans to send her to university but her husband cannot imagine sending her there to “be sitting side by side with men”. (37) She resorts to planning getting her married off. (36) Not wanting to wait to be married off like cattle, Firdaus decides to leave. To her shock she discovered that street is not for women, particularly, unmarried ones. Against her wish, she is later married off to Sheihk Mahmoud, a man “already over sixty, whereas I had not yet turned nineteen”. (45) He is not only a sick man with a repugnant odour but “on his chin, below the lip was a large swelling, with a hole in the middle. Some days, the hole would be dry, but on others it would turn into a rusty old tap exuding drops red in colour like blood, or whitish yellow, like pus”. (43)

The patriarchal practices in Africa are a system in which women are systematically dehumanized and depersonalized in the cloaks of tradition and religion. Marriage and female genital mutilation, in some parts of Africa, are cherished practices at the detriment of the girl-child. While male circumcision enhances sexual life and its enjoyment, the girl’s genital mutilation is intended to have contrary effect. Firdaus’s pathetic sexual experience with her uncle after her circumcision is a case in point:

He was doing to me what Mohamadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing more, but I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known
before but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return. (208)

It is worthy to refer, at this point, to Tobe Levin’s statement on girl-child genital mutilation that “mutilation is permanent—an extreme serious violation of integrity which cannot be condoned”. (208) Often, the mutilated young woman is traumatised for life. In Africa, marriage is an integral part of the tradition and men, who have accorded themselves authority figures and their decisions are central to social organization, even when such decisions are detrimental to women, are known for holding tenaciously to such traditions. Levin, again observed that “tradition has become a shibboleth in the mouths of men who themselves are quite willing to accept change, provided their privileges remain intact”. (208) These situations have raised serious questions on the sincerity of purpose in the much proclaimed African humanity. A situation where marriages are espoused between an elderly man and a teenage girl as we noted in Firdaus’s case and where a step-father sexually abuses his step-daughter as we shall see in Baby T’s case, contradict much vaunted communalist humanism where the child is claimed to be protected by all, and where everyone is the keeper of his/her brother or sister.

We first meet the fourteen year old Fofo, the chief character in *Faceless*, in the street where she lives with other homeless children. Hers is not exactly the same condition with Firdaus. Firdaus has a claim of what she could refer to as home. Fofo as well as her bosom friend, Odarley, sleeps in the street because her mother, Maa Tsuru cannot afford to take care of
her given that she has married another man for whom she keeps making children that definitely will soon be pushed into the consuming mouth of the street if they survive the agony of infant mortality that has become regular with Maa Tsuru as a result of her inability to properly feed her children. The children consequently resort to street life to make a living. Unfortunately, street Lords like Macho and Poison in addition to Onko, a trusted neighbor, are sexual vultures devouring underage girls in the ghetto of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even in the supposedly secured space of their one-room apartment, Fofó’s sister, Baby T is exploited by their step-father, Kpakpo:

Kpakpo tiptoed over to Baby T and tapped her on the shoulder. Baby T sprang up, still drowsy. Kpakpo beckoned her to follow him…Kpakpo took Baby T’s hand and sat her on the bed. He place Baby T before him and signaled 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 breasts and drew down her pants…as Baby T disappeared wholly and completely beneath him, covered entirely even by his relatively small frame. (215)

The deceitful manners and constant breach of trust of the unsuspecting and innocent young girls by trusted neighbours and family members create deep holes on the attempt to accept the viability of the theories and principles that uphold African humanity. In Faceless, for instance, deceitful and sneaky Onko, a corrupt pronunciation of ‘uncle’ by children in the ghetto of Sodom and Gomorrah is noticed. Onko is notorious for his generosity for he often gives out “toffees in
his room to soothe and calm down crying children” (207) and freely allows the children to his house to watch television. In fact, Fofó and her sister, Baby T, often run to him in time of confusion like when suddenly a man came to live with “them in their one room and Maa Tsuru told them to look upon him as their new father” (207) after their father abandoned them. Fofó once described him as “Onko the generous and understanding man”. (216) In fact, the parents in the community have come to trust him with their children. This is the man (Onko) that defiled Baby T to a point of helplessness. In the foregoing, the writers use their novels to expose the social conditions of girl-children in both feudalistic and Christian traditions coupled with “arrogance of power” (Emenyonu 214) in Africa. Firdaus’s frustration at her marriage to a very older and sick man forced her finally into the street abandoning the marriage to become a professional prostitute, a successful one at that. In the street, she meets different men from different social strata. She has given herself freedom, gains courage and confidence and can now choose which man to stay with or not; no longer to be taken and used at will like a piece of property and discarded after use. For instance, a man comes up to her and she

“looked him straight bin the eye and said ‘No’. Another man came up to me and muttered something in a secretive voice which could barely be heard. I examined him carefully from head to toes and said, ‘No’. He enquired: ‘ Why no?’ I replied: ‘ Because there are plenty of men and I want to choose with whom to go.’ (73)

Firdaus thinks that she has escaped from sexual slavery, intimidation and subjugation when she abandons her husband. Unfortunately, they follow her still to the street in the person of Marzouk. Marzouk is a notorious pimp who insists on
imposing himself on Firdaus proclaiming that “I want to protect you from other men”. (101) Firdaus rejects his offer and states that she does not want to be anyone’s slave again that she will rather belong to a master class. Marzouk cannot take that from any woman and asks Firdaus: “How can you be one of the masters? A woman on her own cannot be a master…. Can’t you see you’re asking for the impossible?’’ (104) Marzouk is here playing out the arrogance of African maleness which he expresses by the masculine aggression against feminine protest which brought the story to a fatal end. The story finally ends with Marzouk’s death as Firdaus struggles with him to protect her pride and sexuality. The accident that occurs leading to Marzouk’s death equally leads to Firdaus imprisonment and her consequent execution. Firdaus is remembered as “…a woman battered and tortured from childhood to death, by masculine abuse and insensitivity, and a political and social system in which the rationale for the dehumanization was entrenched and nurtured. The degradation and sexual exploitation which culminate in her death at the hands of hangman started from her family”. (Emenyonu 216) Fofo, the major character in Faceless does not end pathetically as Firdaus because a non-governmental organization later rescues her from the street and rehabilitates her but her sister, Baby T is not so fortunate because she is killed by one of her abusers in his attempt to cover his dastardly act.

In all, the stories of the novels are protest writings by two most formidable feminist writers in today’s Africa against the inhuman treatment meted against women by their own men and the society in general. At this point, it is important to note that through their writings, the writers “…are not only seeking recognition on the level of their humanity, they are also
voicing the tradition that reduces their existence to the reactionary”. (Makailu 281) They want to project the opinion that these awful treatments against women have both moral and global implications and can no longer be ignored. This study also raises a lot of questions on the African humanity as it concerns girl-child abuse and exploitation. Given the consistent cases of exploitation of the girl-child in Africa, Darko and El Saadawi use their novels to expose the social conditions of girl-children in both feudalistic and Christian traditions coupled with arrogance of power African men arrogate to themselves in the guise of religious and traditional practices which in turn dehumanize women.

One wonders the efficacy and viability of Nyerere’s theory of Ujamaa and his defense of African communalism; of Africans “neither needed nor wished to exploit our fellow men” (Oguejiofor 12) or Mbiti’s claim of “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am” or other pro-Africanist claims on communalism and African humanism. Regrettably, their theories seem not to have meaning in the face of the dehumanization attested to in our two novels. They no longer adequately capture nor reflect the social realities of contemporary African lives since step-fathers defile their step-daughters, uncles exploit their nieces, family friends abuse under-age daughters of their friends, neighbours abuse their neighbours’ daughters. There is no need for the continuous proclamation of African humanity when we can no longer actively protect a part of our own. The philosophy of being ones brother’s keeper, of the golden rule espoused as part of the ideals of African humanity and a situation where a good number of men’s sense of rationality have become highly questionable viewed from the lenses of sexual exploitation
and abuse which our authors so efficiently depicted in the novels.

**Works Cited**


