

Depicting the Nature of Female Sex Trafficking in Modern Nigeria through Film: A Critique of Nollywood's *Òlòturé*

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Abstract. Cases of female sex trafficking continues to be on the rise in Nigeria. It is a form of modern slavery that strips victims of their fundamental human rights in a manner that is considered inhumane. Victims are subject to various levels of abuse such as sexual violence and which often affect their psychological wellbeing. Victims of female sex trafficking are either abducted or deceived into subscribing for a travel opportunity abroad in search of a better life. The media is recognized as a channel through which social issues such as human trafficking is addressed in society and film have become a major platform for mirroring the nature of the occurrence of these issues presented for education and advocacy through entertainment. The Nigerian film industry (*Nollywood*) have produced several films on trafficking, however this study seeks to critically analyze the use of language, tone, and the treatment of salient issues presented in the movie *Òlòturé*. This movie is purposively selected for this study because it is recent (2020 release), focuses on female sex trafficking among sex workers otherwise called prostitutes which presents a novelty in the portrayal of the subject matter through film.

Keywords: Sexual violence, female sex trafficking, Rape, *Òlòturé*

1. Introduction

Human trafficking is an international crime that continues to evolve. Victims (mostly women and children) are forcefully and or lured into a life that impedes on their fundamental human right to freedom in the most inhumane way. It is a problem exacerbated in Nigeria by the desperate desire to migrate abroad among other things. In a bid to curb the growing cases of this menace, several initiatives have been taken by government through its judiciary

as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Ndifon, Apori and Ndifon (2012 p.90, 91), enumerates some of such efforts to be Criminal Code Act and the Penal Code with reference to sections on “unlawful carnal knowledge, kidnapping, abduction, defilement”; advocacy by the Women Trafficking and Child Labor Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF).

Human trafficking as defined by the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act (2003) in the Nigerian context is: *all acts and attempted acts involved in the recruitment, transportation within or across Nigeria borders, purchase, sales, transfer, receipt or harboring of persons involved in the use, deception, coercion, or debt bondage for the purpose of placing or holding the persons whether for or not for involuntary servitude (domestic, sexual or reproductive) in forced or bonded labor, or in slavery-like conditions.* (Nsude and Onwubere, nd p.74)

It is worthy of note from the afore definition that human trafficking in Nigeria occur both domestically and as a form of international trade. The trafficking of women particularly female sex workers is of focus in this study. In this case, the victims cannot be said to be naïve. They subscribe to what appears to be a work opportunity abroad in their already established career path, however unknown to them is the fact that their migration work while abroad will be that of exploitation and manipulation. In this study, the researchers examine the nature of subscribed trafficking with reference to female sex workers as depicted in the Nollywood film *Òlòturé*. This study exemplifies international form of trafficking and presents a dimension to the crime of human

trafficking in Africa and Nigeria worthy of exploration.

1.1 Female Sex Trafficking in Nigeria

Female sex trafficking, a form of human trafficking, is the recruitment, harboring, and movement of girls and women for sexual exploitation. The practice is characterized by economic exploitation through coercing, assault as well as fraud. Victims of sex trafficking are forced to engage in different sexual acts, work and live in horrific conditions and endure deprivations of different sorts. They are usually trapped and controlled through deception, manipulation, assault, false promises, threats, shaming, isolation, and debt bondage (CDC, 2021). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) classifies sex trafficking as modern slavery and reported that globally in 2016 there were 24.9 million people trapped in forced labour, with 4.8 million persons in forced sexual exploitation. The Report stated that women and girls account for 99% of victims in the commercial sex industry (ILO, 2017)

Female sex trafficking is a burden in Nigeria and Nigeria is listed as one of the countries with the highest number of trafficking victims (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Pathfinder Justice Initiative 2020, para 4). The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Person (NAPTIP), the agency established to fight human and sex trafficking in Nigeria reports that on steady basis, girls and women are trafficked within and outside Nigeria, especially to Europe. Pathfinder Justice Initiative (2020) reports that Italian authorities stated that “there are between 10,000 to 30,000 Nigerian women working in prostitution on the streets of Italy.” NAPTIP adds that “it is estimated that over 60% of female trafficking victims in Italy are Nigerians.” p 22

Poverty, gender inequality, abusive or unstable family environments in Nigeria all contribute to the high risk of trafficking. Victims are mostly vulnerable persons from poor background, or persons searching for better lives. The study by Okonofua, Ogbonwan, Alutu, Kufre and Eghosa (2004) reported that young women in Edo state believe “that sex trafficking leads to wealth creation and economic gains for women” p 1.

The effects of sex trafficking are both short term and long term with far reaching effects on the victims, families and communities. Women encounter high rate of physical and sexual violence, psychological issues, sexually transmitted diseases, and serious mental health problems. Deshpande and Nour (2013)

add that “The costs to society include the degradation of human and women’s rights, poor public health, disrupted communities, and diminished social development” para 14.

In addressing human and sex trafficking in Nigeria, the National Agency for the prohibition of Trafficking in Person (NAPTIP) was established. The agency works to create awareness, investigate and prosecute trafficking cases. Anti-trafficking laws and policies which criminalizes human and sexual trafficking, have been enacted in the country. Also, government agencies and NGOS, international bodies and advocacy groups all work to reduce the sex trafficking statistics, providing identification, protection and support to sex trafficking survivors. Despite these efforts, female sex trafficking crime still persists. The mass media, particularly film, are useful in creating awareness and highlighting the dimensions of the crime and calling for advocacy against female sex trafficking.

The film *Òlòturé* is currently one of Nollywood’s latest works addressing the subject of female sex trafficking in Nigeria. It has been purposively selected for consideration in this study. The movie centers on the trafficking of female sex workers otherwise referred to as “ashawo” in Nigeria. The women are deceived to subscribe to a ‘privilege’ work migration process to Europe which unknown to them is a disguise to lure them into the web of a sex trafficking cartel. The plot narrates the ordeal of a young investigative journalist by the name *Òlòturé* whom while on an undercover mission into the world of sex workers and sex trafficking cartels in the city becomes a victim of rape and trafficking.

The film *Òlòturé* was released in 2019 directed by award winning Kenneth Gyang a native of northern Nigeria whose works in movie and documentary have gained recognitions locally and internationally. In this paper, a critical analysis of the depiction of female sex trafficking in Nigeria is done with particular emphasis on: the use of language, tone set, as well as the direction of the movie. The essence of this critique is to evaluate the depiction of the reality of female sex trafficking in present day Nigeria.

2. Changing the Narrative on Female Sex Trafficking through Films

Films are part of everyday entertainment culture and they influence how people view issues, as well as practices they engage in. Through films, people get a deeper understanding of the world around them, the challenges and potential solutions. Devasundaram

and Barn (2020) submit that the messages of films are likely to be regarded as true. This is because most times films focus or depict “a real-life event, objectively seek to expose key issues and concerns to reveal the veracity of the phenomenon under scrutiny.”¹

Films create awareness, educate and stir the minds of people towards or against certain values, causes, practices and behaviours. This is a primary tenet of the film theory which explains the influence of films such as movies on the manner in which the audience come to understand and react to societal issues such as female sex trafficking. A number of films have been the impetus for public debates, protests, policy changes and law enactment in different societies. The huge impact of films lie in the fact that they tell stories and stories stay with people. Women Moving Millions (2015) submits that “it is easy to be cynical about a single film’s ability to change the status quo, but history has proven time and time again that there is no greater tool for change than the power of storytelling. Facts can be easily forgotten, but stories live on for generations to come.” P. 9

The issue of sex trafficking has been depicted in films both nationally and internationally. These films create awareness and depict the horrors involved. Examples include Hollywood films, *Traffik* (2018) and *Taken* (2013), and most recently the Nollywood film, *Òlòturé* (2020). Film is particularly successful in transmitting such messages and creating social change because of its reach. Film has the potential for global reach much more than awareness and intervention programmes by governments, NGOs and other bodies on the subject of rape and sex trafficking.

Films are not just media for representing realities; they are tools for the propagation, reconstruction and exportation of values and behaviours. Intentional messages on rape and sex trafficking through films will help shape society’s perception of the practices while entrenching the right values and behaviour. Films can be used to dispel the wrong perceptions and deceptions that get people to fall victims of rape and sex trafficking. They can be used to educate society that rape and sex trafficking are acts of human rights violation. Depictions of sex trafficking in films will help people understand the ramifications of these crimes, help people to identify such practices when they manifest in their groups or communities and enable them seek help for victims.

3. Methodology

The film *Òlòturé* is purposively selected for this study because it is recent (2020 release), focuses on

female sex trafficking among sex workers otherwise called prostitutes which presents a novelty in the portrayal of the subject matter through film. A discourse analysis approach is further adopted in the presentation of the movie critique.

4. Critical Analysis of the Film *Òlòturé*

The analysis of the film *Òlòturé* is done with reference to the use of language, tone, and the treatment of salient issues presented and in connection to the subject matter which is female sex trafficking.

The Use of Language in *Òlòturé*: The dialogue of the movie is one for a mature audience. It is forceful as characters made use of words and slangs peculiar to the Nigerian society that are explicit and ‘raw’. This is quite expected because the movie clearly depicts the life of prostitution and the street-life. The reality of this kind of life is rough and unapologetic in nature. Also, the use of local slangs enables audience to know that the issue of sex trafficking is present among us and not far away from. There was also a predominate use of pigeon English which is considered to be the language of the street in Nigeria, and commonly spoken among prostitutes.

Tone of the film *Òlòturé*: The viewing audience experiences a film through emotions such as: happy, sad, excitement, curiosity etc. while watching set by the tone of the film. *Òlòturé* sets a serious tone as it presents viewers with a comprehensive yet literally bombardment of the reality of female sex trafficking peculiar to prostitution in Nigeria. It explicitly addresses the risk and vulnerabilities of sexual workers to issues such as: female sex trafficking, sexual violence, victimization, brutality and lack of value for human life, desperation for a better life but to mention a few. The viewing audience are able to connect with the issues with a sense of importance and seriousness. The occasional use of comic relief was however adopted to dowse the tension.

Issues portrayed: an array of social issues is presented in the film *Òlòturé*. Although the subject matter is on female sex trafficking, issues such as prostitution, sexual violence, disguised businesses by traffickers, illegal migration, brutality and lack of value for life in the business of human trafficking, delayed response of law enforcement to cases, the desperation to relocate abroad in a bid to have a better life, the affiliations of the elite/politicians with sex peddlers, and the risk of investigative journalism are all addressed. The afore mentioned issues are discussed below:

4.1 Prostitution

This is a trade which is considered to be most common among the female gender. It is considered to be a career as prostitutes refer to themselves to be “sex workers”, rendering a service for which they get paid. Although society frowns at this lifestyle, there are a lot of people who patronize prostitutes and consider them to be providing an essential service. The film *Òlòturé* presents an insight into the world of the average female prostitute in Nigeria. The focus here is on their lifestyle. They are presented as hustlers willing to go to any length to provide sexual gratification in whatever form desirable by a paying customer all in a bid to earn a living. They are portrayed as individuals who have chosen the career path for reasons such as poverty, the need to provide financial support to family members who are mostly unaware that they are into prostitution, as well as the lack of a choice. The latter is the case with Blessing, an orphan, who is being used by her pimp (Chuks) to earn his living in exchange for giving her a ‘better life’ whilst she was struggling.

The organized cohabitation of prostitutes in accommodation semblance to a hustle life is also portrayed. This is seen as the prostitutes all live together in a lodge under the operation of a sex peddler who earn a living from the rent paid by the ladies. The conditions of cohabitation are not comfortable as prostitutes are confronted by rivalry among themselves born out of envy over the fact that a prostitute appears to be the most sought after by customers who refuse to patronize other girls who consider themselves to be better experienced, and confrontations from sex peddlers such as pimps who lay claim to some of the girls; monitoring and controlling their every move. This is also exemplified in the relationship between Chuks and Blessing.

4.2 Sexual violence

Sexual violence is a major concern with prostitution. It is a form of physical abuse which could involve rape and battery of the victim. According to Tarzia (2020), sexual violence is a form of abuse such as; rape, sexual assault, coercion, threats, blackmail, forced consumption of pornography, as well as reproductive abuse. In the film *Òlòturé*, sexual violence of rape, coercion, and threats are exemplified. The lead character, *Òlòturé*, a female journalist whose undercover name is Ehi becomes a victim of rape while attending a private party at the home of a renowned politician (Sir Philip) who drugs and rapes her.

A fundamental issue victims of rape face in society whereby they are unable to report the crime to

family, close friends, law enforcement is also captured in the film. Also depicted, is the blame and lack of empathy for victims of rape among persons who are aware of the crime. This is one reason rape victims choose to be silent or seek to bring the perpetrator to book. In the film, Madam Alero, a sex peddler and trafficker who is one first and only other female in the film to know of the rape of *Òlòturé* tells her to take the money from Sir Philip and remain silent on the incident. This is in line with the position of scholarly researches. For instance, Awonusi and Ogundana (2012), posit that many rape victims in Nigeria find it difficult to discuss the incident because of the need to protect their identity or family name. Other reasons include: shame, closeness to the perpetrator(s), guilt, fear of confidentiality and the fear of not being believed.

From this point on, *Òlòturé’s* mood changes drastically from the lively upbeat character to a gloomy withdrawn lady. This is commonly seen with victims of rape who experience various levels of withdrawal and depression.

4.3 Disguised businesses by traffickers

One pattern which is identified with human trafficking and other forms of trafficking is that traffickers front other businesses that are legal as a way of covering up their tracks. This is seen in the film *Òlòturé* as Madam Alero (the lead trafficker) runs a fabric business in a market, while her Nigerian partner owns a restaurant. Human trafficking is the main business from which these individuals earn their living, however they are intentional in running smaller unsuspecting businesses for which they gain popularity, whilst running the business of trafficking undercover.

Another level of disguise is also depicted in the transportation of the ladies who were supposedly meant to be prospered or travel to Europe (Italy) for work but unknown to them they had been conned into subscribing for a sex trade mission destined for neighboring Benin Republic. The ladies are transported in a vehicle labeled “*Romire College*” and “*Missionaries*” at different times to create an illusion that the occupants of the vehicles are students and church workers.

The film also reflects the fact that traffickers utilize persons that are known to the victims and appear to be trusted as bait to lure victims. Madam Alero, a pimp who is well-known to the prostitutes and one whom they desire to associate with because she is well-connected and have worked in Europe in the past, is used to present the “golden opportunity” to the victims. When such familiar persons are used,

victims often relax and do not seek to ensure the authenticity of what is promised based on trust.

4.4 Brutality and lack of value for life in human trafficking

Victims of human trafficking undergo several forms of physical and verbal abuse. The brutality with which traffickers treat their victims is clearly depicted in *Òlòturé* as victims are verbally abused (harshly spoken to and made fun of), their bags searched, phone seized so as to cut them off any form of communication that could jeopardize or disclose their location. In addition, the victims are whipped, forced to undergo ritual fortification, and a victim is beheaded after she was caught with a phone.

4.5 The desperation to relocate abroad in a bid to have a better life

The film captures the desperation to relocate abroad in search of a better life which is a common desire among many Nigerians especially the youth. This desperation is as a result of the poverty and hardship which continue to ravish a majority of Nigerian citizens who are unable to live a comfortable life because of the failed economic state of the country. This desperation is captured in the film to be the primary reason for which the prostitutes sought to go to Europe and fell prey to trafficking.

4.6 Affiliations of the elite/politicians with sex peddlers

The private dealing of some elite and politicians in society who organize parties and contract pimps to bring girls for their sexual gratification is also portrayed. These parties often take diverse forms and could involve various forms of abuse and violence by these politicians who are perceived to be of noble character in society as they carry acts of philanthropy. This is the case with Sir Philip in the film.

4.7 Risk of Investigative Journalism

As journalists go undercover to unravel issues within the society, they are often confronted by risks that pose as threats to their lives. In reality, some journalists have lost their lives when their cover is blown. While undercover, *Òlòturé* is faced with diverse problems such as threats from Chris who suspects her not to be who she portrayed herself as, fleeing from a wild customer by jumping off a building through the window and, running through dark lonely streets.

Unfortunately, *Òlòturé* becomes a victim of her investigation when she is raped and all her strategies to free herself from the traffickers did not work. Tragedy strikes as she along thirteen others are transported into Benin Republic.

4.8 Delayed Response from Law Enforcement Agencies

The integrity of law enforcement agencies with reference to the Nigerian police continue to be a concern in society. This is definitely not peculiar to Nigeria alone. The lack of swift response to reported cases of emergency and the infiltration of the agencies by traffickers who have informants within is captured. These are seen when a formal report of the abduction of *Òlòturé* by her boss, the Editor of the SCOOP newspaper was made to the police force having read through her journal while undercover and received a phone call describing her location. He presents these as lead but is told the police force cannot set out to accost the traffickers because they have other assignments. It is later discovered when the police finally got to the location that the victims have been relocated which reiterates the fact that they had a lead from the force.

4.9 Collaborations between Immigration Agencies and Human Traffickers

Illegal migration is a strategy utilized by traffickers whereby they provide false identification for victims and transport them across several African countries and by sea until they arrive in Europe. According to Otti (2011) in Okafor, Iwuagwu, Gobo, Ngwu, Obi-Keguna, Nwatu, and Rahman (2020), trafficking of women across local borders in Africa has been on the increase despite counter-measures by government agencies and anti-trafficking organizations. Illegal migration is also portrayed in the film in a manner that points to the involvement of Immigration officers. Victims are given a new identity by a change of name and nationality as is revealed when Madam Alero hands the girls their international passport document. Also, at the border, Immigration officers give preferential treatment to the trafficker, addressing him by his first name which established a cordial relationship, and accepting a bribe.

5. Conclusion

The depiction of the nature of female sex trafficking in Nigeria as presented by the film *Òlòturé* is one that deserves commendation. It presents a holistic package of the various issues that endanger the society by a single act of human trafficking. The

heavy and explicit use of language and the tone set are a reflection mirroring the harsh realities involved in prostitution and sex trafficking which will help to clear the mind of young ladies' (prostitutes and otherwise) whom recruiters lure by painting a glamour life style. This will also help deter young girls to be conscious not fall victims of sex traffickers.

6. Recommendations

Conscientisation programmes should be carried out at immigration and law enforcement agencies should so that their personnel do not serve as agents aiding human and sex traffickers in the country.

In investigating sex and human trafficking cases, relevant agencies should not rule out elites or well-known individuals who are mentioned such cases on face or name value. Doing so may inadvertently be letting criminals walk free to continue perpetuating such crimes.

Several films have depicted sex trafficking and horrors and effects on the victims, more films include depicting justice for victims of rape and sex trafficking as well as conviction of sex traffickers and peddlers. This will serve as deterrent to others in engaging in such acts.

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