

THE TRAUMA OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION: A STUDY OF AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S TRAFFICKED AND NDUBUISI GEORGE'S WOES OF IKENGA

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Abstract

Irregular migration has become a significant concern in contemporary African literature due to its devastating psychological and socio-economic consequences. This study examines the trauma of irregular migration in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked and Ndubuisi George's Woes of Ikenga through the lens of Trauma Theory. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis to explore how the selected novels represent the psychological aftermath of trafficking, displacement, exploitation, imprisonment, and social exclusion. The analysis reveals that irregular migration inflicts enduring psychological trauma manifested through fear, shame, intrusive memories, nightmares, social withdrawal, and fractured identities. While Trafficked foregrounds the traumatic experiences of trafficked women, Woes of Ikenga exposes the psychological consequences of failed migratory aspirations and racial marginalization. The study argues that the selected novels portray migration not merely as physical mobility but as a deeply traumatic experience with lasting effects on migrants' mental well-being and identity. It concludes that Trauma Theory provides an effective framework for understanding the enduring psychological costs of irregular migration in contemporary Nigerian fiction and contributes to ongoing scholarship on migration narratives in African literature.

Keywords: *Irregular migration, trauma, Trauma Theory, African literature*

INTRODUCTION

Irregular migration has become one of the most pressing humanitarian concerns of the twenty-first century, particularly in Africa, where persistent poverty, unemployment, insecurity, political instability, and the quest for better opportunities continue to drive

cross-border movement. While migration is often motivated by the hope of improved living conditions, irregular migration frequently exposes migrants to trafficking, exploitation, violence, detention, and social exclusion. These experiences leave lasting psychological wounds that extend beyond physical displacement, making trauma an important framework for understanding these realities of migrants.

Trauma theory explains how overwhelming experiences disrupt memory, identity, and emotional stability. Herman (1992) conceives trauma as a psychological injury that overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope, while Caruth (1996) argues that traumatic experiences often return belatedly through intrusive memories, silence, and fragmented narratives. For irregular migrants, trauma is not confined to the journey itself but encompasses the violence of trafficking networks, abuse at transit and destination points, loss of identity, and the psychological burden of displacement. These experiences frequently manifest as anxiety, depression, fear, shame, and post-traumatic stress.

Contemporary African literature has increasingly documented these realities by foregrounding the human consequences of irregular migration. Rather than presenting migration solely as an economic or political phenomenon, literary texts expose its psychological dimensions and reveal how displacement reshapes identity, belonging, and emotional well-being. Among such texts are Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga*. While *Trafficked* examines the traumatic consequences of human trafficking and sexploitation, *Woes of Ikenga* explores the psychological disillusionment arising from intervening obstacles in migration. Together, the novels demonstrate that the trauma of irregular migration transcends gender and manifests through diverse forms of psychological and emotional suffering. Although existing scholarship has examined migration, trafficking, and trauma independently, fewer studies have explored irregular migration through the lens of trauma theory in these two Nigerian novels, comparatively. This study addresses that gap by examining how trauma functions as a consequence of irregular migration and how the selected texts represent the psychological aftermath of displacement, exploitation, and loss. Through a trauma theoretical reading of *Trafficked* and *Woes of Ikenga*, the study contributes to scholarship on African migration literature by highlighting the enduring psychological costs of irregular migration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Trauma Theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining the psychological consequences of irregular migration in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga*. The theory explains how overwhelming experiences disrupt memory, identity, and emotional stability, leaving lasting psychological wounds that continue to shape an individual's perception of self and society. Within literary studies, Trauma Theory has become a significant critical approach for exploring how narratives represent experiences that exceed ordinary human understanding, particularly those involving violence, displacement, exploitation, and loss.

The development of Trauma Theory is rooted in psychoanalytic thought. Sigmund Freud first shifted the concept of trauma from a purely physical injury to a psychological wound, arguing that traumatic experiences often remain repressed and resurface in unexpected ways. Building on Freud's insights, Cathy Caruth (1996) conceptualizes trauma as a psychological wound that is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly through intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, and fragmented recollections. Trauma according to Caruth (1996:11) “is the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event”, whose effect continue to haunt survivors because the experience resists immediate comprehension. She further argues that trauma represents “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth, 1996: 3), emphasizing its profound psychological dimension. A central proposition of Trauma Theory is that traumatic experiences disrupt conventional modes of narration and memory. Because trauma cannot be fully assimilated into conscious understanding when it occurs, survivors frequently recount their experiences through fragmented memories, silence, repetition, and disjointed narratives (Caruth, 1996). Such disruptions are particularly evident in literary texts that portray migration, where characters struggle to articulate experiences of violence, exploitation, and displacement. Trauma therefore becomes both a psychological condition and a narrative strategy through which literature represents the enduring effects of catastrophic events.

Judith Herman's (1992) work further broadens the theory by emphasizing the long-term psychological consequences of prolonged trauma. Herman argues that repeated exposure to violence, coercion, and abuse fundamentally alters an individual's

personality, emotional stability, interpersonal relationships, and sense of identity. Survivors often experience fear, shame, depression, social withdrawal, emotional numbness, and difficulties in rebuilding trust. These manifestations extend beyond the traumatic event itself, affecting everyday life and shaping subsequent behaviour.

Trauma Theory is particularly relevant to the present study because irregular migration often exposes individuals to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, physical violence, detention, racial discrimination, social exclusion, and life-threatening journeys. These experiences generate psychological wounds that persist even after migrants reach their destinations or return home. In *Trafficked*, Nneoma's recurring nightmares, fear, shame, and social isolation exemplify Caruth's notion of the belated return of trauma and Herman's understanding of the enduring psychological effects of abuse. Similarly, *Woes of Ikenga* portrays the cumulative psychological consequences of displacement, imprisonment, racism, and repeated disappointment through Ikenga's emotional withdrawal, hallucinations, fractured identity, and loss of hope.

Literature Review

Scholarly reviews on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* has largely centered on gender oppression, human trafficking, female exploitation, and patriarchal domination. Existing studies demonstrate that the novel interrogates the socio-cultural and economic conditions that expose women to trafficking while simultaneously revealing the structural inequalities that sustain their victimization. Ordu et al. (2022), for instance, examine the novel from a gender perspective, arguing that it exposes the patriarchal structures that marginalize women and normalize their exploitation. Their study situates *Trafficked* within feminist discourse, emphasizing that the trafficking of women is inseparable from broader issues of sexual oppression, discrimination, and gender inequality in African society.

Similarly, Okpala (2024) extends this feminist interrogation by examining the role of women as participants in the trafficking network. Adopting an intra-gender perspective, the study argues that the oppression of women in the novel is not solely perpetuated by patriarchal institutions but is also facilitated by women who function as recruiters, collaborators, and beneficiaries of trafficking. This perspective broadens the discourse on gender by demonstrating that exploitation may also occur within female social networks. While these studies make valuable contributions to feminist scholarship, their emphasis remains on gender relations and the mechanics of trafficking rather than

on the enduring psychological consequences experienced by survivors.

Critical responses to Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* have similarly focused on migration as a socio-economic and moral issue. Sam-Duru (2014), in *Chronicles of Ikenga*, interprets the novel as a cautionary narrative that exposes the harsh realities confronting Africans who migrate in search of better opportunities. According to the reviewer, the novel serves as a moral warning against irregular migration by illustrating the enormous risks associated with the pursuit of economic success abroad. Likewise, Onwah (n.d.) regards the novel as a realistic portrayal of the experiences of undocumented African migrants in Europe, arguing that its representation of discrimination, hardship, and social exclusion reflects the lived experiences of many irregular migrants. Aginighan (2015) further emphasize the novel's representation of despair and the moral complexities of migration, noting that the narrative deliberately resists simplistic or optimistic resolutions.

Although these studies provide important insights into the selected novels, they primarily highlight gender, morality, trafficking, migration, and social injustice. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the psychological dimensions of irregular migration or to the ways in which traumatic experiences shape migrants' identities, memories, and emotional well-being. This gap is significant because both novels portray migration not merely as physical movement across borders but as an experience marked by violence, exploitation, displacement, and psychological fragmentation.

This study therefore contributes to existing scholarship by offering a comparative trauma-theoretical reading of *Trafficked* and *Woes of Ikenga*. Drawing on the insights of Trauma Theory, it examines how irregular migration produces enduring psychological injuries and how the selected novels represent trauma through memory, silence, fear, shame, alienation, and fractured identity. In doing so, the study extends current scholarship beyond socio-economic and gender-based interpretations to foreground the psychological costs of irregular migration in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

Mental Health and Post Traumatic Effect of Migration

Migration as has been established is not devoid of cons especially for an irregular migrant. These cons breed traumatic encounters that jeopardise the mental health of a

migrant. Caruth's position on the belatedness of trauma explains how the experience ravage the mental health of migrant just like curses that goes home to rest and builds up a post traumatic effect generally referred to as post traumatic syndrome disorder that haunts the individual after the experience. Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* presents the post traumatic implication which trafficking has on its victims as portrayed through Nneoma and other victims of trafficking. The realities of irregular migration entails abuse, damaged personality, loss of self-esteem, victimization from the public, down to denial of opportunities and decent living. These experiences go a long way in traumatizing the victims. When the victims of trafficking were deported, we see the conduct of some people at the airport towards them ““Shame on you,” one of the officers taunted. “Go and join the rest of the scum who flew in from Rome a few minutes before you.” “Look at them,” another put in. “what a disgrace to the country!”” (17). These people do not care about the stories of how they got trapped in prostitution or what they faced in Italy, all they care about is character damage and throwing of blame and insult.

For someone who travelled out to better her life with thought of heroic return, it was traumatizing to Nneoma the kind of return she made and this forced her to shy off the camera out of shame “Were you also trafficked like the girls from Italy?” “People are saying that you girls are a disgrace to you families and to Nigeria. What do you say to that?” Nneoma trotted forward to escape from these attentions but one reporter increased his pace and a cameraman ran ahead of her and prepared to take her photo. “Get away from me,” Nneoma said. “And you, if you take my photo, I will smash your camera.” (18), having her face captured by any camera with the tag of deported prostitute is that last thing she ever wished for when she left the country.

Looking back at the horrific experience these girls encountered in Italy, one can attest to how inhumane they were treated, raped and beaten. After deportation these experiences resurfaced in their subconscious and relived in thoughts, dreams and any likelihood “As she lay in bed later that night, her mind was flooded with encouraging thoughts. A few seconds later, she had fallen asleep. But not for long it seemed, for she was soon embroiled in a nightmare. “Whatever gave you the idea that you could successfully escape from me?” Nneoma heard a familiar voice snap behind her. She wheeled round and saw Baron grinning in the cruel manner that always precede a beating and a rape. She froze and stared at him. As he took a step towards her, she flinched, shielding her face. How did he find out where she was? What was she to do now? She was standing at

the edge of a road. Why was there no one to help her? She looked around for a weapon, anything to defend herself, but found nothing except an old shoe lying in the middle of the road. As she leaped forward to grab it, Baron pounced on her and threw her to the ground. “No! No!” she screamed and did not stop until she felt a pair of hands shaking her. “Nneoma, wake up! (53-54). Nneoma's urge to write for a competition was sniffed off by the psychological effect of trauma “she wished she could take part in the writers' activities, but dreaded running into someone she knew. She couldn't take the risk” (123). The fear of running into those who would recognize her as a deportee from Italy or someone she knows threw her off the wish to write and associate.

Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* presents the harsh realities faced by illegal migrants in Germany. We see most of the migrants of African descent faced with a whole lot of harsh and traumatic experiences that affect their mental health. This distorted mental state did not erupt abruptly with the experience but sufficed late as post traumatic effect on the migrants.

The central character Ikenga bears the biggest brunt of post traumatic syndrome disorder. He came into the supposed land flowing with milk and honey where he assumed his 'awe' is in high spirits but was eluded by the reality of things. He experienced series of traumatic experiences that was relived in dreams, trances and this burden became the effect of post traumatic experience on his mental health. He survived the traumatic experience of his ship that sank at the Mediterranean sea and this placed at the point of what Caruth described as “the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life” (7), he survived an unbearable event and will have to relive it in its post traumatic effect. Ikenga faced a near death experience navigating his path into Europe and settling in Germany did not give a bed of roses either. He took up selling drugs as a survival option with the promises of getting 'kpali' through his son's mother Vanessa, but the survival option landed him in jail for forty -two months and his release after serving the jail terms made his new found home/relationship sour. The prison experience impacted him behavior in a negative from “it was never the same again. The long and lonely days and weeks in the prison cell had made a lasting on Ikenga's ways of judgment and reasoning” (191) and brought about an unhealthy mental shift. He struggled with the fear of being a failure 'ofeke' and the need to resist that plunge him into the depth of mental drift. The more he tried to come to terms with the normal society he was secluded from the more situation drift apart “because of multiple failures Ikenga

records in his bid for a better life in his host country a tough life; he develops what psychologists call a lack of achievement motivations” (Oyewole 2025:33). These became the series of traumatic situation that shaped him as asserted by Herman (1992) “repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of personality already formed” (96), the once lively, ambitious and energetic Umuafor son that dread being an ofeke became a shadow of himself . He was dealt the biggest blow when evicted from his house for battery and his property handed to his girlfriend and mandatory payment of child support. This act he saw as inhumane and injustice faced by migrant ushered him into the realm of depression and unstable mental health as he moves into a dilapidated building at Robin street and this made him to distance himself from associating with others “he withdrew from his fellow countrymen...their uncountable messages did not move Ikenga to call back. When his cell phone was not switched off, he would watch it ring till it rang out” (211) and this became a pattern till he disconnected and destroyed his phone. The belatedness of trauma manifested as he relived his traumatic experiences through dreams, trance and hallucination “Ikenga do see spirits, in his long lonely hours when consciousness took him back through the journey so far, and the horrible episode in the sea of death. The swollen faces of death often invaded. This time not after his life but to entertain him” (214). He lost connection with reality and this agrees with Herman's assertion that “the victim of prolonged trauma may experience a complete loss of faith in self, in other people, and in God” (1992:52), he became a loner and that only worsened the situation. The post traumatic effect took a toll on the discussed migrants and has lasting imprints on their mental health.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* portray irregular migration as a profoundly traumatic experience with enduring psychological consequences. Through the lens of Trauma Theory, the analysis reveals that the physical journey of migration is inseparable from the emotional and psychological injuries resulting from trafficking, exploitation, displacement, racism, and social exclusion. The experiences of Nneoma and Ikenga illustrate how trauma manifests through fear, shame, intrusive memories, social withdrawal, and fractured identities, reinforcing Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma's belated return and Judith Herman's conception of the lasting impact of prolonged traumatic experiences. By examining the two novels, this study extends existing scholarship beyond gender and socio-economic interpretations to foreground the

psychological dimensions of irregular migration in contemporary Nigerian fiction. It therefore argues that the most enduring consequence of irregular migration is not merely physical displacement but the invisible trauma that continues to shape migrants' identities, relationships, and sense of belonging. Consequently, the selected texts offer a compelling literary critique of the human cost of irregular migration while affirming the relevance of Trauma Theory in interpreting migration narratives.

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