



DEPRAVITY IN IFEANYI AJAEGBO'S SARAH HOUSE

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ABSTRACT: *As living conditions in societies get harder on a daily basis with no hope in sight as to the remedies, people in different parts of societies indulge in forms of immoral acts for survival. Young people, against their wishes, are trafficked for the purpose of prostitution and other ignominious reasons. The depravity that societies are thrown into seriously affects their economic and moral development negatively. It is pathetic that mainly, prominent politicians elected into strategic positions abet the immoralities for their selfish reasons. The kingpins of the shady deals see themselves as the owners of the society; hence, they give impetus to their stooges who operate without fear. Concerned creative writers and other artists decry this ugly trend by mirroring the ill activities in their works in a way that the effects on societies are made obvious. This paper thus aims to x-ray the various forms of depravity as mirrored by Ifeanyi Ajaegbo in Sarah House, expose those involved in the nefarious acts and, as well, explore the consequent effects on societies.*

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Prostitution, Depravity, Society, Literature



INTRODUCTION

Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs in their literature, *An Introduction to Reading and Writing*, state that, in a typical work of fiction, there are always many forces, both small and large, that influence the ways in which characters meet and deal with their problems. According to them, true works of fiction are concerned with society or politics. Ann B. Dobie in *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, says that the function of literature is to make the populace aware of social ills and be sympathetic to actions that will wipe those ills away (93). This is exactly what we have in *Sarah House*. It is a work of fiction that centres on society, aptly focusing on the ills of the society with a view to exposing the people behind the moral depravity of Nigerian society. Nita, along with other girls, are lured out of their families by Slim, a young man whose slender appearance earned him the name. Slim specialises in deceiving the vulnerable girls by making them believe that he loves them, only to take them to a strange house in the city of Port Harcourt where they are used as prostitutes. Slim runs the prostitution business with Fatty and their job also includes trafficking naive girls, using them for prostitution business and selling them to Madam who runs an elevated prostitution house called Sarah House. Sarah House is best described as Sodom and Gomorrah because everything immoral is done in the house. We are not surprised that such places operate without fear because top politicians give them security coverage. The author vivifies this fact by making his novel so realistic so that as you read, you see the facts stand before your face. The researchers consider Marxist criticism as the appropriate theoretical framework for the work. This theory, according to M. H. Abrams, was propounded by Karl Marx (1818–1883) in collaboration with his fellow-thinker, the political economist Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Marx and Engels had met in Paris in 1844. According to Ann B. Dobie in *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, Marx and Engels discovered that they had similar views and they decided to collaborate to explain the principles of communism which was later called Marxism. The theory is against the traditional means of allocating undue merit to the bourgeoisie who own property and thereby control the means of production, and the proletariat, the workers controlled by the bourgeoisie and whose labour produces their wealth (87). Marxism maintains that there should be no class distinction between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production by owning the natural resources and human resources, and the proletariat, who supply the labour that allows the owners to make profit (91). Marxism thus reflects society as it works to rid society of deceptions and expose failings that have been concealed, thereby taking the responsibility of making people aware of how they have unconsciously accepted the abnormalities prescribed for them by their societies. Dobie vivifies that Marxist critics see a literary work not just as an aesthetic object to be experienced for its own intrinsic worth but as a product of the socioeconomic aspects of a culture. The major aim of Marxism is to show the abnormal gap existing between the factory owners (the rich) and the subjects (the poor) and point at them for such gap to be bridged. As Chinyere Nwahunanya in *Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Post Colonial African Literature* states that the study of literature is the study of literary artifacts. *Sarah House* is a literary piece that mirrors the ills meted out to the less privileged by the elevated who treat the less privileged like thrash by making them their perpetual servitude. In studying the text, Marxism is thus adopted as the theory for analysing the text.



Analysis of *Sarah House*

Sarah House is the author's response to the high level of depravity in contemporary Nigerian society. The author uses the fictional characters well developed, to demonstrate the ills being perpetuated by the elevated persons in the society. Young women are lured into prostitution and other forms of immoral acts by a group of bandits who operate without fear because they enjoy some security backing. The condition of the country makes the girls vulnerable; many of them are so anxious to leave the country so they always fall prey to the baits of the gangsters who promise to help them leave the country to the developed and advanced countries. Slim and Fatty go about hunting for girls they turn into prostitutes for their selfish reasons. Slim goes to the village at the bank of Opobo river to lure Nita, an unsuspecting young woman, to be his girlfriend. He kidnaps her and takes her to Port Harcourt where she is amazed to see other young women in a small room who had as well been lured the same way as she. She could not explain how she got to the place and she also couldn't give an account of where the house was located. In bewilderment, Nita says, "I woke up terrified. The realization that the world as I knew it had changed came slowly as the veil of sleep fell from my eyes in dissolving layers..." (1). Obviously, the girls are drugged before being brought to the place so that they could not identify the route to the place. The evidence is made vivid by Nita who gives the account of how she got to the place. In her words, "I had been sleeping since I got here. Sleeping. That was all I could remember of coming here. Several times since I had woken up in this strange place, I had probed the corners of my mind for a fragment of memory which could explain how I had arrived here after getting into the car with Slim at the waterfront (11).

Dress Code in *Sarah House*

In the room, Nita is amazed to see the other young girls who are made to dress provocatively to attract men (*mugu*) who would sleep with them and pay their pimps. According to Nita, "The last of the girls, naked except for a tight-fitting pair of shorts, sat on the floor in the centre of the room (2). To vivify, she gives a picture of the looks of the other girls in the room. "The skirt she wore barely covered the red panties peeking out from under the cloth (2). Whenever there is a new girl incarcerated in the house, the pimps would quickly get them such shabby dresses as dressing modestly is not welcome in the house. Nita laments the condition she finds herself in the room when she says, "The first piece of clothing that came out clutched between my fingers was a pair of red bum shorts that looked several sizes too small. They were obviously meant to cling like a second skin...I did not have to pull it over my head to know that the lower hem would stop well above my belly button. I placed the top on the shorts. How could I be seen in these sorts of clothes (72). Naive Nita had given a vivid picture of how the innocent girls are forced against their wish to sleep with strange men. Yet to understand what happens in the house, she watches as the other girls, Matti, Dumi and Tega undress and wear different clothing that reveal more than they conceal. The girls have no privacy and they have no rights to their body. Nita reports that Fatty watches them as they undress with surprisingly little interest. As Nita averred, "He wore a satisfied smirk that came from the fact that they were doing what he had ordered them to do: get ready for work." The girls looked lifeless and defeated. They moved like wooden puppets. Matti in particular looked on the verge of tears... (17). Fatty says to the girls that it is working time. "Money-making time. We can't keep the *mugus* waiting. They pay the cash, you know" (17). The reader understands from the statement of Fatty how morality has eluded the pimps: they care not about the poor girls. All they care about is the money they make from the so-called *mugus* who pay them to 'devour' the girls. We are not surprised that Nita acts so naively; she was never aware of the type of job she was



brought to do in Port Harcourt. Slim had deceived her with “I love you” and she had followed him unsuspectingly believing him to be her boyfriend. But that was the same means he used to lure the other girls to the city. Matti’s response to her that, “Slim does not love you. He said the same thing to me...And to Dumi. And to Mary. To Ibis. To Ibiwari” (20), demonstrates how wicked and unsympathetic he is. Nati’s further poor treatment by her supposed boyfriend is very pathetic. Since her arrival at the house and was told that Slim told the other girls in the house that he loved them just to get them to the city and make them prostitutes, Nita, still very confused, insists on seeing him. When eventually he comes, he treats her so poorly, so that it dawns on her that she has been living in illusion. It amazes Nita who narrates pathetically that “He shoved me away from him with so much force that I reeled back and collapsed onto the bed (28). After the ugly experience, Slim tells her without mincing words that he has brought her to the city like the other girls to do prostitution job for his benefit. No one dares say *no* to him and it surprises others that Nita has the temerity to speak back at Slim. The consequence for daring Slim was hard on her. “Slim’s left hand explored against the right side of my face. The blow threw me against the wall again, more forcefully this time. Pain raced across my shoulder and down the centre of my back. I would never have believed someone like Slim had this much strength if he had not struck me” (29).

Why Are the Girls Trafficked ?

Nita had left the village partly because of the illusion that city life is better. This is the same illusion people have that makes them fall easily to temptations of trafficking. Nneoma, the chief character in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, for instance, had fallen to the same temptation and was trafficked to Italy for the same purpose of prostitution. The traffickers are clever and smart as they promise their victims of better life in the city. Nita says, “I followed him because I was ready to escape the confines of the small village beside the river that flowed to the Atlantic” (31). At the city, she discovers she had been deceived by illusion. Here, she is forced to sleep with strange men who have settled their pimps. Fatty makes it very clear to her that her duty is, as well as the other girls, to make the men happy because they pay very huge amounts to him and Slim to have them. The job seems so absurd to Nita that she prefers death to accepting such an ignominious job. She responds to Fatty, “I won’t do it” (36).

It appalls Nita most that the men inflict a degree of bruises on the girls and each morning when they come back to the room from the night duty of servicing the *mugus*, they look so tired and weak. Nita’s anger aggravates as Tega tells her that Slim and Fatty take all the money that the *mugus* pay. Tega tells her that the consequence of proving stubborn to Fatty and Slim is “They get beaten, sometimes raped to teach them a lesson. They told us they had killed one girl who was really stubborn” (41). As part of measures to get the stubborn girls to submission, Slim always gets hostile strangers to rape innocent girls to make them submissive. Nita has not forgotten her experience the first time she was brought to the house and proved stubborn to sleep with *mugu*. Her punishment was to be raped by total strangers. She says, “The strangers would file through that door in their numbers and rape me” (72).



Security Involvement in Social Crimes

One most pathetic thing in *Sarah House* is perhaps Lothar performing pornographic movie with young innocent girls whose consents are not sought. The reason why Lothar is not afraid to carry out the ignoble acts in *Sarah House* is because of the high powered security he enjoys from politicians. Nita laments how Lothar is given the liberty to choose any girl from among the girls for the pornographic movie. From her revelation, the reader understands the abominable things that happen in *Sarah House*. “Sele or Miko, perhaps both of them, had told Tega and me that Chief had made sure that Lothar was never charged or prosecuted when his film-making activities came to the notice of the authorities” (187). It is expected that in a situation where social ills are witnessed, security agents would work round the clock to ensure that such crimes are fought to a standstill. But in Nigerian society, as mirrored by Ifeanyi Ajaegbo, social ills are on the increase because security agents who should work to maintain security rather give security coverage to the perpetrators of the ills because of their status in the society. When Nita wonders why Slim and Fatty carry out their nefarious acts with impunity, Tega discloses that police cannot do anything to help the poor girl because, “They tell us they have friends in the police” (41). She tells Nita that reporting to police shouldn’t be an option because police are their friends and they give them a lot of bribes and other gifts. “So when you run to them, they simply lock you up and call Slim or Fatty or one of the more terrible boys to come and take you back. Then something really bad happens to you” (43). Eventually, when the girls are resold to Madam of *Sarah House*, they discover that the Madam enjoys adequate security from the military. Nita narrates that, “A gloating sound seeped into Stella’s voice as she told us that Madam also had a lot of militia friends who made sure that anyone who ran away from *Sarah House* never lived long enough to tell the story (116). Part of the reason why police and military provide security to the gangsters is because of the caliber of personality who have interest in the illegal business. Chief, a perpetual visitor to the *Sarah House* and Madam’s confidant, is reported by the author to be a big-time politician. “He was the chairman of the ruling party in the south-south” (167). The author vivifies that the chief had been Madam’s lover for a long time; they are now simply close friends, confidants and business partners. His connections opened a lot of doors for Madam, and kept a lot of unwanted people, including the police from looking too closely at some of the activities in *Sarah House* as to ascertain what Madam did for a living (167). *Sarah House* reveals the reason for high rate of insecurity in Nigeria. According to Nita the naive narrator,

... Mofe told me about gangs of thugs and cult members who trafficked in women and children: well-organized criminal gangs that were so entrenched they had bought their way into the police and other law enforcement agencies using their connections with politicians and big-time business people. The activities of these gangs supplied the commodities for the sex-and-organ transplant market in Nigeria and abroad (245).

It is heart breaking that politicians voted to power to protect the masses are those who cause perils to the masses. The poor masses could not do anything to help themselves because politicians are involved. In Nigeria, politicians are vested with unlimited power; they are like demigods and many of them cause harm to society with impunity because of the overwhelming impunity they enjoy. They milk the country dry and use the stolen treasure for their selfish interest. Nobody dares ask questions about the ill activities of the politicians, else, the consequence would be daring. We discover that in our society, law is only meant for the common people. Pornography is abhorred in the society but not frowned at when the aristocrat is involved. This fact is well demonstrated in *Sarah House* where Madam allows Lothar to



make pornographic movies with the girls as stars. In *Sarah House*, Lothar, a foreigner from Germany who chooses his partner from among the poor girls in the house uses belts, whips and other bizarre things in bed. *Sarah House*, as a fiction, has served as a mirror through which certain facts are exposed. It has so clearly revealed that most pornographic movies are done here in Nigeria. Nita says, "I had seen pornographic movies in what now seemed like my other life. I had never seen them made. I did not even know they made them in Nigeria. But after some time, the performance on the bed became revolting" (147). It is quite disheartening the kind of freedom given to Lothar by Madam to choose among the girls who to act pornographic movie with. The consent of the girls is never sought. Any of them chosen is expected to comply. Nita reports how amazed she is when, according to her, "Someone touched my right shoulder. I stiffened, then realized the sounds coming from the bed had stopped...I opened my eyes, expecting to see Tega's hand or perhaps Stella's on my shoulder. I was surprised to see Lothar standing before me (148). Nita's refusal to act a pornographic movie with him amazes the girls because they know that the consequence of her refusal is brutal. The kind of stormy look in the gaze Stella fixes on her for her rejection of Lothar spells it all (149).

Why has Sarah House remained in operation despite all the dirty activities in the house? The simple answer is that the house is run by the aristocrat. It is owned by Madam, Chief's erstwhile lover but the book gives us the true founder of the house to be Chief. It is pathetic pornographic how movies are acted in the house in the broad daylight in the presence of the inmates. Nita narrates the high rate of impunity in the house involving Senators and other top politicians. "A senator from one of the Niger Delta states, a hawk-faced man with the eyes of a monitor lizard toasted him in glowing terms...very soon after the senator's toast, Lothar announced that he had a surprise for the meeting. It seemed to be a common knowledge in Sarah House that Chief had been Lothar's mentor and protector. Every time immigration officials stumbled across Lothar's file, an anonymous phonecall always made sure the file moved deeper towards the bottom of the pile of cases to be prosecuted until it disappeared entirely (187-188).

Still appalled by the fact that Nigerian politicians and senators abet immoralities in the society, the novel gets the reader informed about what the politicians do with naive young girls. The author mirrors the obvious fact that many Nigerian politicians are paedophiles. Chief visits Sarah House regularly from Abuja just to have fun with young girls he is old enough to be their father. Having been with Nita all through the night, he develops special penchant for her. The following morning, he pays her a huge amount of money which is immediately retrieved from her by Stone for Madam. Not minding his age, Chief derives pleasure in having amorous affairs with minors. Though the might for sex has eluded him, he still derives pleasure in being with young girls. He says to Nita, "You are here to satisfy me. You are here to give me pleasure, to be the object of my pleasure. You are here to make me feel young again" (97). Chief derives pleasure watching Nita's nakedness while fondling his penis. This is all he desires so he demands that Nita comes to keep him company in Abuja. As a stakeholder in Sarah House, Chief's desires are priorities to Madam. She buys beautiful clothes for the small girl to prepare her for the long trip to Abuja. The politicians do not suffer to make the money so we are not surprised that they are spendthrift, lavishing the nation's resources on naive young girls. Chief really enjoys the company of the young girl that night and before she leaves, she discloses how ravishing Chief has taken care of her. According to her, "When I looked at the amount put into the account, I almost fainted. It was more money than I had ever imagined being able to call my own. Just before Kena took me to the airport, Chief shoved three bundles of one thousand naira notes into my hand" (231).



Not minding Nita's little respite, finding favour from Chief, it is observed that the welfare of the poor girls is no priority of the pimps. If they die, the body is cast away and life continues. All they need from the girls is to get enriched from the poor girls and anyone that proves stubborn is beaten to submission. As a neophyte in the house Nita fails to understand why innocent girls should be used for the business of serving the *mugus* without any benefits. Tega says to her, "But for Slim and Fatty, it is about money. It is about how much money they can make from your pain and suffering, from our pain and suffering. Their wealth comes from our degradation and subjection to the most humiliating acts known to man. Often this comes with a lot of pain...You just fuck him and get out of the place while they (Slim, Fatty or their boys) come to collect the money" (42) (*Emphasis ours*). The pimps are very meticulous. While beating the poor girls, which is the pimp's preoccupation, they try not to inflict injuries on any conspicuous part of their bodies because *mugus* do not like girls with bruises. Tega tells her, "Most times they do not hit you in the face, because they don't want the *mugus* to see the bruises. *Mugus* don't like girls with bruises. It spoils the fun and takes away the fantasy that they might be sleeping with a goddess. Fatty and the boys beat you on the body, so badly you can hurt for days" (43). Tega seems to be most unfortunate. Ever since she was lured to the city by Slim the same way as he had lured others, Tega has always experienced one peril or the other. While in Fatty's care, before being resold to Madam, she once laments her ordeals to Nita after being battered by a *mugu*. Hear her, "They did things to me I don't want to talk about. I don't even want to remember what they did to me...But they are things that will be part of my nightmare for as long as I live" (44). In order not to be hurt, she is always docile and never argues when asked to go and service any man. But who cares. She is later resold to Madam for further exploitation. First, Madam who had since after separating from Chief, her erstwhile sex partner, turned a lesbian, prefers her for her amorous satisfaction. Nita discusses that Tega told her later that she had spent the night with Madam, who is a lesbian and she has enjoyed pain with her sex. "I had to beg her to stop when I thought my head would explode from the filth that poured into it through my ears (104). In the climax, the docile Tega, after being sexually exploited, is frustrated to death. Her body is abandoned like the carcass of some lower animal after being sexually assaulted. This demonstrates the poor treatment meted to the helpless poor ones in society. All through the story, nothing is said about the families of the poor girls in the house.

Sex is supposed to be fun if two agree. However, all through in *Sarah House*, sex is without fun. The poor girls are simply sexually exploited. They are paired with any man by the pimps without the consent of the girls. Once a man pays the pimps, the person is immediately paired with any girl. The girls are not expected to say 'no' to the men. Obviously, the men take drugs to enable them have marathon sex with the girls to compensate for the huge amount they pay to the pimps. The girls, in some cases, struggle for their safety when they can no longer endure incessant painful sex with men they abhor. Sometimes, the *mugus* sustain injuries as they struggle with the girls. Nita has this to say about the man she had once been paired with. "I realized that what I thought was a smile on his face was a long scar that ran the length of his chin, just beneath his mouth. The scar had not healed well and now the raw skin looked like a hideous mouth that would never close...The scars made him look like a dangerous and violent criminal. A man who could give as much physical punishment as he had obviously taken. A man to be scared of (56). The men are already given the names of the girls they are paired with but the girls are not given pre knowledge of whom they would meet. Thus, Nita wonders 'who had told this aberration my name' (57). The description given by Nita about her experience with the man vivifies the fact that sexual pleasure can only be when both parties are in



consensus. According to her, “I felt the heat crawl up my arm from the point where the tips of his thumb and forefinger massaged the skin. It wasn’t the sensual response I felt when I clung to Slim. This was different: a clammy kind of heat that was malignant and oppressive at the same time (59). Nita had loved Slim whom she believed was genuine when he wooed her to be his lover. As for the *mugu*, the man with scars, she never had any affection for him. Her abhorrence for him is heightened by the fact that he seems so irresponsible. “His body felt hard under his shirt, like something carved out of cold stone. This close, I smelt his breath, a mixture of *Kai kai*, the local gin, and marijuana. There were several other smells I could not name (60). Not minding how she detests him, Nita can’t avoid not sleep with him for he has paid for it. She says, “He pulled me against him once again. This time I felt his turgid penis pressing against my abdomen. I looked up into his eyes, begging him as my shirt came off in his hands (61).

While with Fatty and Slim, the girls are made to wear skimpy dresses that expose almost all delicate parts of their bodies. Nita does not like dressing indecently but she has to comply. She says, “some men looked pointedly at the bared parts of my body as if making it clear that they knew what sort of work we did” (75). In order to get customers especially wealthy men who are their major customers, sometimes, part of the girls preoccupation is to dance in sensuous steps and they are usually required to go complete naked. “Full, perfect breasts with shiny black nipples, painted with a film of oil to heighten the effect, heaved and jiggled with each sensuous movement around the pole” (80). The situation is not different in Sarah House. Having been resold to Madam, the first thing Nita notices is how shabby the girls already with Madam dressed. She observes three very pretty girls with long legs, dressed in net bras with their nipples pointing through holes in the fabric and very tight bum shorts (88). Madam gets a lecherous tailor to sew skimpy wears for the newly bought girls. Nita reports with dismay that even the tailor is allowed to handle the girls anyhow it pleases him. Nita relates pathetically that the tailor “picked up the tape once more and resumed measuring Tega, fondling her breasts and caressing her buttocks. As a second class citizen, Tega is not expected to resist. The other girls who had been with Madam understand the tradition. Hence, through the character, the author states, “Across the room, Miko and Sele watched from their beds. The look of amusement on their faces told me this was nothing new to them either. This was something they had become used to, being caressed and fondled by anyone because they did not own themselves” (120).

To climax the perennial poor treatments given to the poor girls, they are always bought and sold like ordinary commodities. Though slave trade was abolished in Nigeria long after colonization, today, another form of slave trade involving young innocent girls being kidnapped and sold to fellow Nigerians for the purpose of prostitution is in vogue. Prostitution is proscribed in Nigeria yet, it is still a lucrative business. Children of the poor masses are lured to the city and, in most cases, to Europe where they are forced into Prostitution for the monetary benefit of the merchants. This is a realistic fact in society and many concerned Nigerians decry this sinister act in their literature. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, for instance, condemned the ill in her *Trafficked*. Nneoma, the chief character in the novel, is lured to Europe with many fascinating promises of a better life in Europe. She gets disillusioned while in Europe as she discovers she had been trafficked for the purpose of prostitution. In *Sarah House*, the story is not different. Many young girls are lured to Europe just in the same vein as Adimora-Ezeigbo’s Nneoma. Madam of Sarah House is a victim of international prostitution. Her pathetic experience is well demonstrated as Stella makes some important revelations to the poor girls.



According to Stella, “Madam’s life had been a colourful, adventurous but sad one. Her story was as checkered as it was glamorous. Madam left Nigeria for Italy when she was barely fifteen. An uncle living in Rome needed her to come... (180). In Italy, just like Nneoma, she is forced into prostitution. Again, like Nneoma, she is sold by Uncle who had trafficked her from Africa. The manner Uncle treats her, as described by the author purgates emotions from the audience. Even after she has, through her prostitution, paid off all that Uncle demands, he still refuses to let her go because she is, according to the author, darkly beautiful and regal, as close to the perfect African beauty idolised by Europeans; she has to remain yielding money for him. She continues in the job until she is repatriated and she meets Chief who developed interest in her. Chief, the original owner of the Sarah House, erstwhile lover of Madam, uses the prostitution house in the Port Harcourt city to settle her. Now as the proprietor of the house, she begins to buy young girls from Fatty and Slim and turns them to prostitutes; she sews mini dresses for them so as to appear attractive to the clients she arranges for the girls.

The way the girls are sold like heifers calls for public attention. Madam, back to Nigeria, one would expect that like Nneoma, she should seek rehabilitation and feel pity for other girls going through similar ordeals as she has passed through in Italy; she rather takes ownership of Sarah House and begins to buy girls. She treats the girls more callously than she was treated in Europe. She allows her girls to be battered by the men and the life of the poor girls matters little to her. First, she allows Lothar to dehumanise the girls whom he stars in his pornographic movies. As if the girls were not human beings, she ensures that they appear almost naked and she, against their wish, uses them for sexual satisfaction as she has turned to a lesbian. Nita comes back from Abuja where she had gone to satisfy the salacious Chief, who derives pleasure watching young beautiful girls stand naked before him as he fondles his penis, and discovers that Tega, her confidant, had been humiliated to death. This intensifies her desire to take a gory risk of leaving Sarah House because she knows that her life in the house is equally not safe. It doesn’t take them anything to waste life.

The business of prostitution in Nigeria is lucrative and a risk seen as worth taking because prostitutes are mainly patronised by shameless wealthy men and politicians who pay huge amounts of money to enjoy the bad life. Pimps live wealthy by being paid to pair them with their prostitutes. The young girls used for the prostitution business are not given peace at all. As long as there are men willing to pay to the pimps, the girls are expected to service them without break. They witness painful experiences from the rough and unsolicited sex from the malevolent men. Nita speaks pathetically about the experience of Tega: “She was as much of a slave as I was, as much in bondage as the rest of us. I was not all right. A dull pain still throbbed between my legs. The sleeve hem of the shirt Slim brought after the stranger had his way with me hurt each time it touched the chafed skin around my left elbow. I was beginning to think that the only way out of this mess was to kill myself” (68).

The business of prostitution is indeed thriving. Wealthy men come in their numbers to have the young girls. This is made vivid on page 77 as “The driver stayed in the car. A loose group of men stood outside the shopfronts, close to where we had stopped. Some of them called out greetings to Fatty.” In Sarah House, Fatty still renders services to Madam. His job includes getting men that would be paired with the girls. “Fatty stopped at the centre of the room and looked contemplatively at Tega and I, as if he was deciding who would follow him through the door again” (82). It is painful that the girls used for the ugly business are underage. From Nita’s vituperation, the fact about the ages of the girls are revealed. According to her, “There were four beds, two on each side. The young women, who looked not much more than seventeen,



sat on different beds, looking submissively down at the floor as we filed in behind Living Statue's twin (91). The men pay so dearly to have the girls. Chief and his types wish to remain ever juvenile with perfect features. Their problem is to remain young no matter what it will cost them. This is perhaps their reason for their choice of minors who they believe would rejuvenate them. While discussing with Nita, Chief laments his depreciating stature. He says, "I used to be young once...just like you...Look at me. This belly no wan' go back...I would pay one million naira to make this belly disappear." He never wasted time to tell the young Nita all he needs from her. "You are here to satisfy me. You are here to give me pleas-ure, to be the object of my pleasure. You are here to make me feel young again (97).

On their own, the girls in Sarah House prefer old men not because they pay well, after all, the money is not paid to them but to their pimps. The old men, unlike the young ones like Lothar, handle the girls gently. Many of them, like Chief whose strength had eluded him enjoy watching the girls nakedness which gives him sexual satisfaction. Being touched or just having the girls stand naked before him is enough to give them satisfaction. Nita vivifies this fact on page 99 when she says, "I knew instinctively what he wanted. I reached behind me for the clasp of my brassiere. It came undone with a soft snap and the bra fell to the floor beside the top. I felt pressure lift from my chest as my breasts sprang free. An indistinct tingling burned my skin where the edge of the bra had been tight. I was mildly surprised I felt no shame as I stood before his wandering eyes, half naked and waiting for his next command." Chief releases sperms by merely pressing himself while looking at Nita's nakedness. She reports that after he had released, Chief opens his eyes, a dreamy smile on his face, he thanks Nita and asks her to go and clean her body off the sperm that touched her. Afterwards, he "took out a large bundle of money and held it out to me." The amount of money paid by Chief by having her stand before him naked astonishes her. However, Stone, Madam's subject is already at the door to collect the money from her for Madam (100). Other girls like Sele and Tega's conditions that morning are pathetic because the young men they were paired with really dealt with them. The novel reports that "Sele collapsed against Tega's body as Tega's arms encircled her. Sele cried out in pain as the supporting arms touched an injury we could not see (103).

The pimps know that the activities in Sarah House are ungodly and it is made known by the author that the girls are not treated well but they have no slightest opportunity to run away from the house. No sane girl would delight in being treated the way the girls are treated: forced to sleep with strange men who end up inflicting injuries on them in addition to other inhuman treatments. For instance, on page 143, the audience is given a vivid picture of the inhuman act meted to the poor girls. Nita says, "I followed the progress of the girls as they moved from one table to another through the cheering crowd. The men adored them, touching their breasts and pubic area with naira notes before either sticking them into their hairpins or dropping them at their feet. The girls moved on while a man followed discreetly, picking up the money." It is indeed pathetic that after the dehumanising treatment, the poor girls are not allowed access to the money paid by the *mugus*. Nita remembers with dismay her first experience in Sarah House after a night with Chief. She laments, "I remembered Stone standing outside in the corridor and reaching his hand out for the money Chief had given me. It did not matter where you were in this world, the rules were the same. They were dehumanising and enslaving" (143). Nita gives a vivid description of how barricaded Sarah House is. The reason is to ensure that the girls have no means of leaving Sarah House. According to her, "There were guards with dogs and high walls topped by razor wires. I could not leave Sarah House." The location of Sarah House is not known to the girls. First, Slim kidnaps the girls, drugs them only for them to wake up in a



strange place where they stay for sometime before being resold to other pimps. Not minding how barricaded the place is, Madam's subjects render incessant surveillance on the girls to ensure they do not leave the premises. The poor girls have no right to anything; they are in perpetual fear and they cannot do anything to help themselves. They cannot run away because they are incapacitated. Besides, they have no place to run to. They are meant to remain resolute as they have no option. Nita reports, "I watched in silence as Tega moved around like a robot under Stella's watchful eyes. She wore a strained expression that tore at my heart" (151).

Sarah House is indeed comparable to the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. Dehumanising the girls is a recurring decimal in Sarah House. The author, through Nita, has x-rayed what happens on a regular basis in Sarah House thus, "I couldn't get the image of the girls dancing from one table to another and the men touching every part of their body with naira notes out of my mind. I could not forget the hands of so many men touching their breasts and other parts. It was more than I would expect as 'work'. In the privacy of a room with one man, forced to do the inevitable, was one thing...to be fondled and caressed in public by more than fifty men" (150). Nita who is naive about the activities of Sarah House has declined acting pornographic movie with Lothar and she is reported to Madam who is not pleased about Nita's action. If not that Nita has found favour with Chief, she would have regretted her action. However, Madam still interrogates her to know why she should not do what others do. She is meticulous in her response to her, "I said nothing. There was no need to tell her I found Lothar and the 'work' he did repulsive. The work made money for her, or Lothar would not do it in Sarah House" (155). Obviously, why the prostitution houses like Sarah House and others have continued to exist is simply because only the less privileged girls and not daughters of the privileged are used for the dirty activities. Nita, while responding to Madam, discloses how she was kidnapped by Slim. "He took me from my home. He took me from my village." She remembered that Madam would exploit her more, understanding how less privileged she is. Thus, "I stopped talking as abruptly as the outburst started. Why would she want to hear my story? My personal tragedy had been Madam's benefit. She bought me from Slim, so what did it matter to her that Slim took me from my home. He could have brought me from the depths of hell for all she cared. Why should my life interest her when she bought and sold people as if they were objects?" (156-157).

In Sarah House, there is an orphanage. One wonders what an orphanage does in a degenerated place as Sarah House. In many parts of contemporary societies, cases of illegal orphanages exist. In such places, young girls who are inmates in such places are impregnated by hired young men so that the babies would be sold to ritualists and childless couples. *Guardian Newspaper* of 18th April 2021 reported that about twenty-two illegal orphanages were closed by a state government. Similarly, *Punch*, 14th March, 2020 reports that Edo State government shut down an orphanage where children were sold for one million, seven hundred thousand each. Ifeanyi Ajaegbo is aware of this; hence, he vividly mirrors it in the novel for people to be aware of such crimes and be wary. It appals Nita what orphanage is doing in a place where innocent people are dehumanised. As reported by the author, "Yet it was a little difficult to believe that a person who bought and sold young women who were little more than children themselves would go out of her way to protect the orphans" (160). Nita's suspicion that human parts are sold in Sarah House triggers when she discovers a mysterious room in Sarah House. This room is a no-go area for anyone except the person appointed by Madam to always be in the room to carry out the crime of obviously organ harvest. Curiosity always draws Nita to ascertain what transpires in the room especially at the dead of the night. The day she tries to go



to the room, she is caught and seriously warned never to come close to the room again (173). This is the day it becomes quite obvious to Nita that some illegal business takes place at the place. One of the orphans, Damka, whom Nita has fallen in love with, eventually falls victim. Nita returns from Abuja where she had gone to service Chief only to discover that Damka is conspicuously missing. “Stone made it clear that he did not know where Samora had taken Damka. He also made it clear he thought I shouldn’t worry too much about the matter. This sort of thing happened now and then in Sarah House (237). On page 245, the author makes it vivid what Madam does with the orphans and the other poor girls. They are sold or they are killed and their parts are retailed. While these ugly deals take place, the author reports that politicians provide them with high powered security. Thus, “The activities of these gangs supplied the commodities for the sex-and-organ transplant market in Nigeria” (245). Nita discovers that mortality rate is high in Sarah House. Within a very short period of time, two persons so dear to her, Damka and Tega are obviously killed in Sarah House.

CONCLUSION

Uche Nnyagu’s belief in *Literature and Literate* that fiction is a mirror of the author’s society is well demonstrated in *Sarah House*. The novel aptly vivifies how young girls from less privileged families are lured to the city where they are forced into prostitution by their pimps who control them and perpetually exploit them financially. The researchers view this social crime as having serious effects on societies. One, if such act is not arrested, innocent persons from the less privileged families would keep being humiliated and killed. The researchers’ choice of Marxist theory is well justified as a hiatus between the rich who own the prostitution houses and the poor whom they use in the houses to enrich themselves is clearly disclosed. The researchers suggest that more researches should be carried out on other novels using Marxism because to them, works of such would help in salvaging societies.

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