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"The Child is Father of the Man": Prostitution and Street Hawking in Uwem Akpan's "An Ex-mas Feast" and Chigbo Ugwuoke's *Ogadimma*

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Abstract

This article examines the blight of prostitution and street hawking on the children protagonists in Uwem Akpan's "An Ex-mas Feast" in the short story collection, *Say You're One of Them* (2008) and Chigbo Ugwuoke's *Ogadimma: The Diary of Housemaid* (2015). It discusses the plight of children who act in the capacity of their parents by engaging in risky and dehumanizing jobs in a frantic bid to survive and provide financial support to their families. Guided by the culture of poverty and structuralist theories, this article forays into the dearth of hope and the birth of hopelessness in these young protagonists who step into adult roles due to parental, societal, and institutional failure. The article finds that a nation besieged with blighted childhoods and aborted destinies can only spiral into abysmal chaos and criminality.

Keywords: Poverty, Prostitution, Street hawking, "An Ex-mas Feast," *Ogadimma*

Introduction

Since time immemorial, African literature, especially the prose genre has doggedly x-rayed virtually every aspect of the human society, especially the condition of the poor and destitute. In African novels like *Things Fall Apart*, poverty is portrayed as a curse that must be broken, hence the struggle by Okonkwo not to end up like his father, Unoka. Thus, through hard work and sheer determination, Okonkwo is able

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to break the jinx of generational poverty. Although, the characterization of Okonkwo can be seen as a model representing how an individual's effort can alter and break generational destitution, in some other cases, the jinx of generational poverty is not so easily broken and can remain entrenched in families, spiralling into vicious tentacles leading to child labour and an unrelenting cycle of poverty. This view is aptly captured by studies done by the United Nations, where poverty is considered the prime factor responsible for child labour. Many children who are born into poverty, survivors of natural disaster and other crisis, have restricted opportunities for education and self-improvement which predisposes them to dehumanizing and laborious activities. Poverty alleviation is considered an issue of global concern and the primacy of this agenda is reflected in the first and second United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are targeted at the eradication of poverty and hunger by 2030. The need for Africa to fulfil the SDGs by 2030 is made more urgent not only because of the economic, social, and moral decay wrought by poverty but for the fact that between 1990 and 2015, other developing regions apart from Africa have attained the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving poverty, which therefore makes poverty elimination in Africa, with all its devastating consequences more pressing (United Nations).

Pandemics and natural disasters also give rise to child labour. About 160 million children were subjected to child labour at the beginning of 2020, but with the COVID 19 pandemic, an additional 9 million children are susceptible to child labour (UNICEF). Poverty is both the cause and the result of child labour. By forgoing education and engaging in work at an early age, children are deprived of the means that will empower them to break the circle of poverty. Children are compelled to work to secure food and to survive when wages are insufficient to support the family. The condition of vulnerable children is worsened by the absence of laws and enforcement to protect their rights and dignity (Lee). Although, child labour is prevalent in many countries, the developing ones seem to be most affected. In some cases, from as young as seven, millions of children toil in quarries, factories, mines, service industries and fields (Wallenfeldt).

The image of the destitute child is a common sight in the Nigerian society today. Continually, children are forced into roles and activities that compromise their innocence and integrity. Children from poor homes without possibilities and opportunities often have to fend for themselves and become the breadwinners of their families. Such children constantly engage in life threatening and dehumanizing jobs in a bid to survive. Child labour can be described as mentally and physically

injurious work that impairs development and denies children of their potential, childhood, and dignity (International Labour Organisation, "What is Child Labour?"). Some tasks carried out by children are beneficial to their development, such as, domestic chores or when older children help with the family business or work after school hours or during holiday to earn some pocket money (International Labour Organisation, "What is Child Labour?"). Child labour is typically seen when children are deprived from attending school, prematurely compelled to leave school, or obliged to do long and strenuous work in addition to schooling. In extreme cases, child labour is seen when children are enslaved, separated from their families, and left to fend for themselves in big cities, often at an early age (International Labour Organisation, "Definition"). According to ILO standards, child labour is work by children under 15 years or the age of completion of compulsory schooling which is subject to some exceptions. The worst forms of child labour are seen in slavery, debt bondage, prostitution, pornography, forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, use of children in drug trafficking and other illicit activities, and all other work likely to be harmful or hazardous to the health, safety or morals of girls and boys under 18 years of age (International Labour Organisation, "What is Child Labour in Africa").

A sister term to child labour is forced labour. Forced labour is subsumed under child labour and can be described as the worst form of child labour. ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) stipulates that, "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily" is regarded as forced labour. Forced labour and forced marriage can be described as modern-day slavery. Statistics taken in 2021 indicate that 49.6 million people are in modern slavery occasioned by being forced into marriage or being forced to work against their will. 27.6 million people are in forced labour conditions while 22 million are in forced marriages. Women and girls are not left out because they constitute about 11.8 million of people in forced labour. Statistics further reveal that children make up more than 3.3 million of all those in forced labour (International Labour Organisation, *"Global estimates"*).

The rise of industrialization in 18th and 19th century England saw a sporadic increase in the use of child labour in saw mills, textile industries and coal mines. In the Victorian era, writers like Charles Dickens criticised the work houses, debtor's prison, and orphanages that exploited and oppressed the poor. The gloomy image of utter desolation of the poor can be seen in the works like *Oliver Twist* and *David*

Copperfield, and it correlates with the childhood of Dickens. Dickens came from an average middle-class family. His father had a well-paid job but financial mismanagement led the family into debt. Consequently, Dickens was withdrawn from school at an early age and set to manual work in the factory while his father was sent to prison for debt (Collins). In a similar vein, African novels also reveal the unfortunate realities of forced labour. For instance, in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu is recruited as a child soldier to fight in a civil war that breaks out in a fictional West African country. His life spirals into a loss of selfhood and inexplicable brutality. Agu's experience resonates with Ugwu in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun.* Ugwu is forcefully conscripted into fighting the Biafra war. He suffers loss of innocence and transforms into an unrecognisable monster. The gory travails of the child soldier are similarly painted in Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. The forceful recruitment of the boys' soldiers is followed by initiation into the world of hard drugs which deaden their souls and make them indifferent as they unleash untold sufferings and terror on others. Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* illustrates the nitty- gritty of black prostitution in Antwerp, Belguim. The black street walkers, who are from different African countries, have immigrated to Antwerp to escape from poverty, unemployment, ethnic cleansing, and to have a better life. For the ladies who trail the streets of Antwerp during the day and spend their nights partially nude behind show glasses, Belgium provides the anonymity they need to sell their bodies for dollars. It takes the death of Sisi for her colleagues to realize the precariousness of their lives and the riskiness of their new found profession. Through the child narrator, Darling, the imagery of children that are left to fend for themselves is vividly captured in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. The several escape missions of Darling and her young friends to Paradise in search of food is testament to the deprivations and neglect many children suffer in the society. Amma Darko's *Faceless* exposes the street life activities of Fofo and her siblings. Although she is fourteen, Fofo is trapped in a liminal space of childhood and adulthood, a space where her age and experiences viciously contradict each other as she engages in all manner of illicit activities to survive on the streets. The above novels reveal that African literature is heavily underlined by the thematic concerns of child labour and forced labour and this challenges the society into questioning the premium that is placed on protecting the innocence and integrity of children. The purpose of this article is to examine the bane of prostitution and street hawking in Akpan's "An Ex-mas feast" and Ugwuoke's *Ogadimma* and its devastating effect on children and the larger society.

Theoretical Background

Giving its scope and prevalence, many scholars have tried to account for the root cause of poverty which has led to various theorizing on the subject. This article examines the culture of poverty and structuralist theories in a bid to delineate the core factors that are responsible for poverty. Oscar Lewis formulated the culture of poverty theory in 1959 after he studied the way of life of some Mexican families living in the slums of San Juan. Culture is popularly defined as the way of life of a group of people. Culture is learned and transmitted among the people in a particular geographical space. Following from this, the culture of poverty is a model of life that governs the attitudes, and behaviour of people living in poor communities. Lewis posits that the culture of poverty transcends merely situating poverty within the personal inadequacies of individuals in the society. To Lewis, the culture of poverty is "a subculture of Western society with its own structure and rationale, a way of life handed on from generation to generation along family lines" (19). It is not simply a case of deprivation or absence of good living conditions, instead, it is:

> both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair that arise from the realization by the members of the marginal communities in these societies of the improbability of their achieving success in terms of the prevailing values and goals. (21)

The culture of poverty is borne out of the attitudes which the poor develop about their marginal positions in the society. These behavioural patterns that are developed as coping mechanisms are transmitted to members of their group and with time, becomes an entrenched culture by which they exist. Accordingly, persons who have imbibed these set of cultural values, continue to perpetuate and languish in an unrelenting cycle of poverty that is transmitted across generations. Lewis asserts that people who exist in a culture of poverty disengage from the larger society and have a marked distrust for dominant classes and institutions like the police, government, and cynicism towards the church (23). They experience chronic unemployment and underemployment; they receive low wages, produce little wealth, and receive little in return; they lack property, savings, absence of food reserves and suffer chronic cash shortages. As a result, they buy smaller quantities of food at higher prices, borrow at usurious interest rates, and have informal credit arrangements among neighbours and there is a high incidence of pawning of personal goods. The

orientation of people in a culture of poverty is geared towards living for the moment and so, there is little disposition towards delaying gratification and future planning (21-23).

Children who live in a culture of poverty are particularly vulnerable. Childhood is not seen as a "specially prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle" (Lewis 23). Children get exposed to sex at a young age and since informal marriage arrangements are more accepted, the family tends to be matrilineal in nature with high sibling rivalry and competition for affection and the limited supply of goods. In this culture, "there is a widespread belief in male superiority and among the men a strong preoccupation with machismo" (Lewis 23). The culture of poverty becomes stamped into the lifestyles of people because when slum children are six or seven, they usually have absorbed the basic attitudes of their subculture which makes them psychologically unprepared to explore opportunities that could alter their condition (Lewis 21). Although, there are poor people all over the world, Lewis opines that they all do not exhibit a culture of poverty. Some poor communities have high degrees of social organisation, place high premium on literacy, and have extended unilateral kinship systems, which give them a strong sense of identity and continuity (23).

The structuralists, on the other hand, do not situate poverty within the province of imbibed attitudes of individuals. The structuralists' viewpoint can be summed up in their assertion that poverty is occasioned by the interplay of certain economic, social, and political variables that ultimately constrain people to poor conditions. In essence, structural theories depict poverty as resulting from negative functions of capitalism (Goldsmith and Blakely; Royce). Samati et al. assert that despite an individual's endeavour (skills, hard work, and competencies), capitalism creates conditions that promote poverty. The economic system is organised in such a way that the poor fall behind regardless of their competence (Bradshaw). The theory also asserts that within a market-based competitive economic system, unequal skills and capital, endowment of talents, which determine productivity result in poverty for some individuals (Davis and Sanchez-Martinez).

"The Child is Father of the Man:" Prostitution and Street Hawking in "An Ex-mas Feast" and *Ogadimma*

"The child is father of the man" is a well-known idiom that is attributed to William Wordsworth in his poem, "My Heart Leaps Up." This idiom is popularly summed up to mean that a person's childhood habits influence the behaviour exhibited in adulthood. This suggests that the true nature of a person is not altered by time and

age. Therefore, the manners, work ethics, discipline, and habits that children imbibe determine the behaviour they exhibit in adulthood. Since the home is the first place of socialization for children, it, therefore, occupies a central place in the development of the growing child and has the potential to make or mar the child's future. In some quarters, the expression, the child is father of the man has been interpreted to mean that after a parent has nurtured a child from a young age, providing education, and other means of subsistence, at old age when the parents are old and frail, the order is reversed and the child becomes the father/ mother of his/her parents, providing support and assistance to them. In many African societies, the aged parents move in with any of their adult children who then take up the role of a caregiver to them. Taking the two interpretations of the idiomatic expression by Wordsworth, it can be deduced that the growing years of a child are the golden years where character formation takes place. Unfortunately, children who spend their growing years on the streets, in risky endeavours, are exposed to harrowing experiences that often deny them the opportunity of meaningful adulthood, and this is aptly depicted in "An Ex-mas Feast" and *Ogadimma*.

Having acknowledged the two interpretations that are often ascribed to the saying, "the child is father of the man," this article adopts a literal interpretation to the expression. This is because the protagonists in the two texts are robbed of their childhood and compelled to engage in hazardous economic activities in order to provide financial support to their poor families. True to the literal meaning of the expression, they indeed become parents in their childhood by engaging in prostitution and street hawking, while their parents stay idle or engage in criminal and other sub productive activities that yield little or nothing. Instead of Maisha and Ogadimma to learn the ethics and habits that will foster their growth into a stable adulthood, a case of situational irony is instituted and they are thrown into street life thereby fitting into the mould of parenting their parents.

In "An Ex-mas Feast," Baba, Mama and the other children are feverishly waiting for Maisha who is out on her prostitution rounds. The hopes of the family hang on her. She is twelve years old, the oldest in the family, with very little prospects in life. Maisha's only alternative to prostitution is the option offered by Mama, which is to take baby around and beg for money but she refuses to do this because she regards it as child abuse (Akpan 5). Even though Maisha is subjected to the oppressive cords of child abuse, she chooses to protect the baby from also suffering a dehumanizing fate. Mama, on her part is ambivalent towards Maisha's lifestyle, she hates it and at the same time, looks up to Maisha to solve the family's manifold problems. When

Maisha comes home to have a change of clothes, which becomes less and less frequent, "she would give [Jigana] money to pass on to [their] parents, she avoided them as best as she could, as if their presence reminded her of the too many things in [their] lives that needed money" (Akpan 2). Even still, Mama would sometimes go out of her way to provoke her, "Malaya! Whore! You don't even have breasts yet" (Akpan 2) and typically, Maisha would ignore her. The only valuable property in the shack is Maisha's trunk. She had "brought it home a year ago and always ordered everyone to leave the shack before she would open it" (Akpan 6). The trunk symbolises "suspense and consolation" for the family, nobody knows the contents, except for a lingering perfume (Akpan 6). The trunk of twelve years old Maisha is the only treasure of the family. They are filled with awe at its presence and are consoled that it may contain material goods that could guarantee them a better life. Whenever Maisha is gone for long, Mama would bang on the trunk in frustration and at other times, she "held on to it while she slept." (Akpan 3)

Torn between excruciating poverty and a sense of justice, poverty takes the upper hand and stifles whatever guilt Mama feels about Maisha's lifestyle. She hates Maisha's life but relies heavily on her for the family's survival. Poverty puts Mama in a partially demented frame of mind; it is the switch that controls her judgement. On Ex-mas eve, Mama expresses her displeasure that Maisha refuses to beg with baby and when Jigana tells her that Maisha "went with the ma-men tourist…real white people, *musungu*...with monkey" (Akpan 5), Mama spits out in irritation and tells Jigana, "*puu*, those ones are useless. I know them. They don't ever pay the Ex-mas rate and then they even let their ma-monkey [sleep with] her" (Akpan 5). Mama expects Maisha to be more selective of her clients, she should have eyes only for those who can pay her fee as a sex worker, not those who would sleep with her and expect her to also sleep with their animals. Maisha's lifestyle is excusable to Mama on the grounds that it solves the family's unending problems. Baba and Mama rely on Maisha to sponsor Jigana's schooling, and on this particular Ex-mas eve, Mama tells Jigana,

> don't you want to complete school? she can't just give you uniform only….Maisha likes your face...please tell her you need more – shoes, PTA fee, prep fee. We must save all Ex-mas rate to educate you, first son. Tell her she must stop buying those funny designer clothes, those clothes smelling of dead white people, and give us the money. (Akpan 6)

Besides organising the schedule of which child would take Baby out for begging, Mama's contribution towards Jigana's proposed education rests on Simba, a pregnant

stray dog. Mama who was good at "spotting dog pregnancies, had baited her with tenderness and food until she became ours; Mama hoped to sell the puppies to raise money for [Jigana's] textbooks" (Akpan 4).

Mama's ideology of living life as it comes, without concrete plans on how to cater for the family aligns with that of Baba. His occupation is pocket picking, but his is asleep on Ex-mas Day while Naema is out with Baby begging for money, and Maisha is on the streets doing prostitution. When he wakes up, the first question he asks is, "is that Maisha?" (Akpan 15) and when he is told that she is out working and hanging out with the white tourists, he tells Mama, "They must to pay ma-dollars or euros. Me am family head" (Akpan 15) and when he learns that Maisha had gone with the "ma – men" he asks if Jigana thanked Maisha's clients for him and asked where they were going (Akpan 16). When Jigana answers in the negative, he tells him that he should learn to grab opportunities. Soon, Baba was "cursing himself aloud for drinking too much and sleeping through Ex-mas Day and missing the chance to meet the tourists." (Akpan 16)

Baba is always in the habit of going into hiding; anytime Bwana Marcos Wako and his wife come in search of him because for four years he has been indebted to them. When Baby was born, they had raided the house, carting away Baba's work clothes in the name of "debt servicing" (Akpan 8). However, on this Ex-mas, they seemed to come in peace. When they ask about Baba, Mama is quick to tell them that he is not at home. They tell her that all has been settled, that "Maisha came to [them] last week. Good, responsible girl. She begged us to let bygone be bygone so that Jigana can go to school" (Akpan 8). Mama is exhilarated at this news, "she began to sing Maisha's praises and promised never to pound on her trunk again" (Akpan 9). Mama also recalls the other good deeds that Maisha had done of recent, how "she had taken the twins to a barber, and Baby to Kenyatta National Hospital for a check-up" (Akpan 9). Sadly, Maisha is the backbone of her family, even when she is a child herself, in need of the security, and provision of her "parents."

An insight into Baba and Mama's lineage is presented when Mama reads from the family Bible, an inheritance from Baba's father. His late father had mandated them to write the names of all their relatives, living and dead on the Bible, "in recognition of the instability of street life" (Akpan 12). Mama tells the family that they must do Ex-mas worship and she begins to read out the names of the family members from the torn and tattered Bible. The image of generations of displaced family members, slum dwellers, and poverty-stricken relatives gives credence to the intersection of the culture of poverty and structural fissures in the society that

push people to the margins of perpetual destitution. Each family member she called had a miserable and unfortunate past. Mama begins with "her father who had been killed by cattle rustlers, before she ran away to Nairobi and began living with Baba" (Akpan 12). She "called out Baba's mother, who came to Nairobi when her village was razed because of some politicians who wanted to redraw tribal boundaries" (Akpan 12). Mama also reads out the name of Uncle Peter, her brother who taught Jigana how to outsmart the officials and bathe in the city fountains without being flogged. The police had mistaken his identity with someone else and killed him. His corpse was donated to a medical school because they could not afford the mortuary bill (Akpan 12). The intersection between the culture of poverty and the structuralist theory of poverty is emphasized by the horrific and meaningless lives and deaths of Baba and Mama's relatives. This points most poignantly to the fact that besides certain innate characteristics in people that fasten them to a life of poverty, state insecurity, ethnic crisis and cleansing, herders' clashes and displacements are also principal factors that drive people to the ghettos, slums, under the bridges and alleyways where they engage in consensual unions and reproduce equally unempowered children thereby creating a strong and unbroken chain of poverty. The strong demarcation between the rich and the poor and state policies that promote this wedge in many corrupt nations of the world, assist in broadening class distinctions and compounding the economic woes of sections of the populace.

Maisha thus becomes the sacrificial lamb of the family. Naema, her younger sister, is also on a journey to a violent end because at ten she is already the girlfriend of a dreaded cultist; while Jigana carries a rusty penknife everywhere he goes (Akpan 8). Maisha envisions a better future for herself, a future that she cannot immediately have due to lack of parental provision and support. She decides to go full time into prostitution to make enough to sponsor Jigana through school and save for herself. Maisha realises that education means empowerment and hopes to achieve that goal someday. She tells Jigana, "You will be a big man tomorrow… I don't want to stand on the road forever. Me myself must to go to school one day" (Akpan 10-11).

In *Ogadimma,* Ugwuoke portrays very aptly, the stark realities of forced marriage, marital crisis, separation, and child labour. Although, the ideas explored in the work appear different, poverty is the nucleus that binds these issues into a tight, interwoven tangle. The protagonist, Ogadimma, suffers several deprivations as a young girl which nearly truncates her future. Her mother, Mabel is forced to marry Ude by her parents who are anxious to fulfil a promise made to Ude's father that their children

would marry. And since Ude's father was ill and at the verge of death, Mabel's parents make the costly mistake of withdrawing her from school so that Ude's father can see his only son marry before he passes on (Ugwuoke 9).

Although, Ude's father is a rich man, with a lot of properties, his only misfortune in life appears to have an heir. Knowing the irresponsible only son he had, Ude's father purposefully arranges a marriage between Ude and Mabel but this only releases Ude's resentment and hatred towards both of them. His father "forced marriage to Mabel down his throat, in the hopes that Mabel's ambitious, diligent and homely demeanour would rub off on him…Ude spent every single second of that marriage making sure that it didn't" (Ugwuoke 19). Before the marriage, Ude "pursued different means of supposed quick riches; he really wanted to impress his father and show that he too could amass wealth. It frustrated him as each get rich quick method blew up in his face. After the marriage, he no longer bothered" (Ugwuoke 19).

Ugwuoke depicts quite graphically, the hopelessness, lovelessness and disillusion of the girl child who is forced into marriage. After enduring the turbulent marriage for three years and birthing Ogadimma in the process, Mabel's life takes a sharp twist and it dawns on her that remaining in the marriage will be at her peril. She was a 19-year-old haggard mother, plagued with a 2-week-old fever and migraine; a secondary school dropout who was fed up with her marriage (Ugwuoke 9). She could not afford to get proper treatment for her fever and Ude was a "lazy man who knew only how to drink to stupor and beat her up when he wasn't passed out cold" (Ugwuoke 8). Mabel decides to leave her marriage, taking Ogadimma with her but she is prevented from taking Ogadimma by Ude's elder sister, Daa Ngozi.

Ude takes over sole custody of Ogadimma after the break up of his marriage to Mabel and from there, he launches into his main occupation of selling the plots of land inherited from his father. He is unprepared for the cost of child care, and begins to fret when he realises that there were "only two plots left" (Ugwuoke 14). He wonders in terror how "the proceeds from just two plots would suffice for his daily maintenance till the day he died…and there was Ogadi's school fees and upkeep to consider" (Ugwuoke 14). Like someone that has had a revelation, Ude realises that he needs a job to survive, but this idea is alien to him because he has never worked a day in his life. Daa Ngozi seemingly compounds his problems when she tells him that he needs to marry so that he will have someone to "take good care of [him]" (Ugwuoke 15). The weight of Daa Ngozi's statement almost makes Ude's head to explode because he is unused to thinking too many things at a time. His head begins

to swirl with the thoughts, "just two plots. Work. His daughter. Marriage" (Ugwuoke 15).

The character of Ude sheds an important perspective on the culture of poverty theory. Ude's lifestyle makes a poignant statement that in some cases, poverty is occasioned by an individual's internalised beliefs and notions about life that hinder the upward mobility and emancipation of the person. The cultural practice in Nigeria and other countries of leaving one's inheritance for the "first son" sometimes encourages the attitude of laziness and reliance on wealth that was not worked for. And so, Ude is contented to be the heir apparent of a rich father. He develops a huge sense of entitlement and sees no need to get an education, or learn a viable trade. He plans to live on his father's plots of land till his dying days. After drinking-away his inheritance, Ude suddenly comes face to face with poverty in all its excruciating and strangulating dimensions. With her mother, jumping out of Ude's sinking life, it is the unfortunate Ogadimma that is left to face a bleak future under her father's watch.

Ude arrives at the conclusion that if he is to remarry, it must be to a working-class woman who would not be "another dependant" (Ugwuoke 18). Unfortunately for Ude, he gets married to an equally calculating and scheming woman, Onome. She marries Ude because she thinks that he is wealthy. After the marriage, it dawns on her that Ude does not need an heir because there is nothing to inherit (Ugwuoke 18). Ogadimma's hopes for a stable and happy childhood is erased with the coming of Onome into their home. She was "an angel …whenever [Ude] was around (Ugwuoke 18) at other times, she maltreats and punishes her. Onome uses Ogadimma as a house girl and makes her hawk vegetables in all-weather even when she is ill.

Onome's childlessness and the apparent affection Ude has towards Ogadimma worsens her resentment towards Ogadimma until she devises a permanent means to get rid of her. Ogadimma becomes a victim of her stepmother's hatred and her father's irresponsibility. Helplessly, she watches as her future is pawned away due to her father's failure to provide anything to her. Onome deceives Ude into believing that she is pregnant and can no longer work to sustain them. And since his palm wine business yields very little, she tells Ude that the solution to their financial quagmire is to send Ogadimma off to the city to learn "catering and baking" (Ugwuoke 25).

Onome seals her argument by citing examples with other villagers that had done the same. She tells Ude, "see Nkem, Mazi Amadi's daughter. They sent her to learn the catering trade in the city. Within a few years, she was done and her madam

settled her. Today, she is sending money to her people" (Ugwuoke 24). Also, see, "Nwokeoma… his parents sent him to learn a trade and today he is a rich importer and exporter. Just yesterday, he came to the village with a big, fine jeep" (Ugwuoke 24). Ude's extreme poverty makes him vulnerable and gullible to Onome's ploys. He did not have any plans for his own future. Only for Ogadimma he realises that:

> it would be extremely hard, if not impossible, for him to cater to family needs and pay for his daughter's school fees and other expenses…. he didn't want to let his daughter go… but if he didn't let her go, then she would be forced to drop out of primary school and waste her years learning how to be an incompetent lay-a-bout like him. (Ugwuoke 25)

At the young age of nine, Ogadimma is torn away from the familiar surroundings of her home and sent to Abuja to work for Madam Nago, hawing buns and other snacks. In Madam Nago's house, Ogadimma is fed once a day on watery soup and garri (Ugwuoke 48). On her second day of hawking pastries, Ogadimma does not make much sales and this greatly angers Madam Nago, who wastes no time to tell her, "I didn't bring you here to eat food and waste pastries. I brought you here for business! If you don't start selling, I will send you back to where you came from" (Ugwuoke 43). Ogadimma gives in to bitter tears when Madam Nago tells her, "What type of useless child from useless parents did Eke bring this time?" (Ugwuoke 43). She vows that her parents will never be called "useless" again. She learns the nitty-gritty of street life from Yinka, a fellow hawker. She learns how to dash in between cars to sell her snacks, how to cross the road when the traffic turns red (Ugwuoke 44) and soon she begins to sell all her snacks. Despite Ogadimma's hard work, she is mercilessly beaten by Madam Nago for eating some of the snacks on the day she is sent off to hawk without breakfast because Madam Nago left the house early. Eventually, she is sent away on the allegation that she is a witch (Ugwuoke 69). Although, Ogadimma desires to be returned to her father, Uncle Eke tells her that her parents owe him money for bringing her to the city to learn a trade and she must work to offset the debt (Ugwuoke 54). Another job is found for Ogadimma and her hazardous life as an underaged worker continues until fate smiles on her and she is reunited with her biological mother.

Conclusion

This article examined the blight of prostitution and street hawking in "An Ex-mas Feast" and *Ogadimma*. Much like Maisha who walks the streets as a prostitute in "An Ex-mas Feast," Ogadimma is exposed to a life of street survival by hawking.

The travails of these two protagonists are occasioned by parental failure and the inability to educate, nurture, and provide a safe and stable environment for their children. The occupation of Baba is pickpocketing while Ude's occupation is selling plots of land and when he sells all his family lands, he launches into an unsuccessful career of palm wine tapping. The failure of the adults to live up to expectation, forces the children to step into their shoes, the natural order is pathetically reversed and children become the parents. "An Ex-mas Feast" and *Ogadimma* prompt the society to reflect on the erosion of childhood, and the unbridled descent into morally debasing and life-threatening activities that curtail the progress and meaningful existence of children. Even though ethnic unrest and displacement also push people into extreme poverty; the individual's perception and attitude to life and work are also factors that predispose them to poverty. No doubt, a nation that is constituted of street kids engaging in all manner of hazardous jobs is on a steady descent towards criminality, moral ineptitude, and insecurity.

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