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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Baby Factory Syndicate: An Emerging Trend of Trafficking in Agunloye's *Disposable Womb***

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**ABSTRACT**

Human trafficking has been described as a crime that involves the recruitment of people and compelling or coercing them to provide labour or services or to engage in commercial sex acts. Men, women, and children of all ages and from all backgrounds have become victims of this crime, which occurs in every region of the world. The baby factory phenomenon is the latest form of human trafficking and sex slavery in Nigeria. Although relatively new in Nigeria, this latest trend of human trafficking is rapidly flourishing and gradually gaining ground as a big enterprise in different parts of the country. The baby factory practices involve young women who are held captive and forced to produce babies for sale or trafficking. This is obviously a very dangerous trend that requires serious attention because of the physical, mental, and psychological effects of the baby making activities. This paper, therefore, explores the factors responsible for the growth of the clandestine business as depicted in Irene Agunloye's *Disposable Womb*. The paper adopts the analytical method of data analysis since the data for the analysis are sourced from the play text. The findings reveal that women's desperation and patronage of the baby factories are due to the stigmatisation of childless couples in Nigeria. This desperation has led to an increase in the demand for babies. The derivable financial benefits from the baby harvesting business have also contributed to the growth of the industry, which results in physical, psychological, and sexual violence to the victims. The paper condemns the evil practice and proffers possible solutions.

**KEYWORDS**

Human trafficking, Stigmatisation, Clandestine, Factory, Childless Couple, Enterprise.

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**1. Introduction**

Human trafficking generally involves the recruitment of people and compelling or coercing them to provide labour or services or to engage in commercial sex acts. This has become a common practice in most parts of the world today. Men, women, and children of all ages and from all backgrounds have become victims of this crime all over the world. Trafficking and sex slavery are perceived as modern forms of slavery which impinge on the general well being of boys, men, women, and girls in particular (Odinye, 2018, p.39). The baby factory phenomenon is the latest form of human trafficking and sex slavery. Although relatively new in Nigeria, this latest trend of human trafficking is rapidly flourishing and gradually gaining ground as a big enterprise in different parts of the country. The baby factory practices involve young women who are held captive and forced to produce babies for sale or trafficking. This is obviously a very dangerous trend that requires serious attention because of the physical, mental, and psychological effects of the baby making activities.

Baby factory, as the name implies, is a "factory"—a black market where young women are held captive, often against their will, and forced to produce babies for sale or trafficking (Agunloye, 2019, p.3). Agunloye further describes the term "baby factory" as an organized and highly coordinated commercial network of criminal activities. In the factory, teenage girls or unmarried young women, who are victims of the clandestine business, are sexually abused, exploited, and forced to become pregnant. The young

girls who are the victims of the clandestine operations are used as "baby-making machines."The innocent babies produced by them are sold as commodities to infertile couples. This is a very dangerous trend that requires serious attention because of the negative implication of the clandestine business on the health and wellbeing of the victims, who are mainly women and innocent babies. Thus, there is an urgent need for policy makers to expedite action on this issue by investigating the factors responsible for the emergence and patronage of the nefarious baby factory business and exploring possible ways of curbing the prevalence of the business.

The factory operators trade in babies as well as the unlawful adoption of babies (Huntley, 2013, p.10). They are put under cover right from the sign posts and names and thus disguised as Herbal Clinics, Hospital and Maternity Homes, Orphanages/Motherless Babies Homes, Social Welfare Homes, Faith Based Organisations, Sachet Water (popularly known as Pure Water) Factory and even Non-Governmental Organisations (Ele, 2016, pp. 13-14). Although they are often disguised as homes for orphans and sometimes appear as churches as well as charity homes, going by their names, they function clandestinely. It has become the last avenue for infertile mothers to realize their dream of motherhood.

The operation of baby factories is structured around some basic principles. The baby producers for the factories are recruited by brokers who target poor, uneducated, rural young women who subsequently are disciplined into submission, accepting their roles as 'perfect mothers' "for national and international clients" (Pande, 2010, p.975). Sometimes, young girls– who are not pregnant – go to the factories willingly (yet through deception) or forcefully (often through kidnapping) to be impregnated by men who function either as employees or associates of operators of baby factories. These girls are then kept in an enclosure, which in many ways can be likened to a prison where they become docile bodies to be disciplined and subjugated (emotionally, mentally, and sometimes physically). They remain there until the day they give birth, and the babies, afterward, are sold to willing buyers.

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## **2. Literature Review**

This paper focused mainly on the phenomenon of the baby factory business, which is considered a new form of human trafficking in Nigeria as captured in Irene-Salami Agunloye's *Disposable Womb*. The baby factory phenomenon is in itself a new form of exploitation and sex slavery. It is an illegal business which has become a common practice in Africa. It is perceived as a modern form of slavery that impinges on the general well-being of young girls and, therefore, a violation of human rights. In this segment, we shall be examining some of the factors responsible for the growth and continuous existence of baby factory enterprises in Nigeria. Some of the factors include the issues of traditional/obligatory motherhood, Commercialization of women's reproductive capacity, the vulnerability of women, poverty, and ignorance, among others.

### **2.1 Traditional/Obligatory Motherhood**

Women's desperation and patronage of the baby harvesting factories are due to the stigmatization of childless couples in Nigeria and issues around the cultural acceptability of surrogacy and adoption. This desperation has led to an increase in the demand for babies.

In Nigeria, motherhood is regarded as supreme, the crowning glory of any woman. Childlessness and infertility are often viewed as a curse. Motherhood is seen as the ultimate single manifestation of being a woman, and children crown this relationship. Motherhood certifies a woman's importance in her society (Salami-Agunloye, 2011, p. 24). A childless woman is treated with disdain. She receives no sympathy from the community, which strips her of her sexual identity. In other words, childlessness confers a genderless status. The only available mode of identifying a woman is "motherhood." Motherhood defines true womanhood; it

has been carved out as the other identity for women that when she is childless, her status is perceived as one without identity. No self and no gender, as many call a childless woman a 'man.'

In Ezeigbo Akachi's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, for instance, Iwuchukwu calls Chieme a 'man' because she is childless. This verbal abuse and emotional torture traumatizes Chieme. She becomes heartbroken and down cast. She says, "I was shocked and afraid. My heart palpitated. I trembled" (*The Last...*,p.105. Iwukwuku continues to torment her with his harsh words. Kneeling in front of him, she pleads,

"My husband does not do this to me..." In anger, Iwukwuku retorts, "... I cannot wait any longer. I am the only son of my father. It is my duty to fill this ngwuru with children," with this, he dismisses her plea. In desperation and shame, she continues to plead, accepting to live with the incoming co-wife. "I am not against your taking a second wife, ...But let me stay with you" (p. 105). He refuses, giving flimsy excuses. Iwukwuku probably would have thought it useless keeping a barren wife, seeing her as wasted and an unprofitable investment. "His choice of words stung me like a scorpion. I wiped my eyes with the tail of my cloth. So that was how he saw me all this while, and yet I believed I had a husband who loved me?" (*The Last...*,p.106). This demoralizes Chieme, "my self-esteem was severely bruised..." (*The Last...*,p.106). This is the plight of an infertile woman, the pain and agony that she goes through because of infertility. Thus, infertile women make an extra effort to normalize themselves and thus adopt subjectivities provided by power. They tend to present themselves as very "normal" women and especially fit for "motherhood. (Salami-Agunloye, 2019,p.3)

Nfah Abbenyi (1997) observes that in many literary works, a woman's identity is portrayed through the framework of motherhood. This is probably because motherhood is always associated with the understanding of Nigerian women's lives and identities within socio-cultural contexts. In *Our Wife is not a Woman* by Stella Oyedepo, the mother-in-law compels her son to marry another wife because of Dupe's (her daughter-in-law) inability to bear a child. Abena, Dupe's mother-in-law's friend's, asks scornfully, "For how long will your son endure a barren woman." Similarly, in *Nwanyibuike*, a play by Anuli Ausbeth-Ajagu, we see the agony of a childless woman in Eastern Nigeria as in other parts of Africa. Chineze, who is married to Oguefi, is thrown out of her home because she cannot bear a child. When she calls on God as a source of comfort, her mother-in-law, Mama, torments her:

Did I hear you mention God? The only god our people recognize is the God that opens the womb of a woman to produce children in abundance (8).

Here, the assumption is that God has destined every woman to have a child when the reverse is the case; it is assumed that God has probably cursed the woman or her chi (destiny) has refused to favor her. Mama and her son, Oguefi, succeed in getting a new wife to replace Chineze and relegate her to perform only house hold chores.

Oguefi: I warned you before that my new wife is the real woman in this house.  
You and your empty womb would be in charge of all the household chores (10)

It is in line with this humiliation that Ada Azodo (2003), referring to Nwapa, says women should feel free to engage in motherhood when it pleases them or withdraw from it anytime, through will or awareness". A woman who is unable to become pregnant is called a man and not a woman. This is seen in *Our Wife is not a Woman* by Stella Oyedepo, where Dupe is insulted thus,

"...is your madam a woman? To me she is not. Do you call her a woman? She is not a woman..." (*Our Wife...*,p.34) Also, in Onyekachukwu Onyekuba's *Sons for my Son*, we see the same trend, as Ndidi, the wife of Obiefuna is mistreated by her mother-in-law because of her childlessness, her mother-in-law unleashes all manner of abusive names on her and threatens to bring a real wife for her son. She says to her,

Eniyide: I don't blame you. My son allowed you to bring  
Your ill-luck to him; that is why you have mouth to talk rot. (18).

To fulfill her threat, she attempts to kill Ndidi so she can bring in a new wife for her son. Unlike in the other cases, we see in *Sons for my Sons* that it is Obiefuna, Ndidi's husband, who is infertile and not Ndidi. Here, Onyekuba draws our attention to the patriarchal culture that puts the blame of infertility on the woman all the time because it is taboo to pronounce a man infertile in traditional African culture. (Agunloye, 2011, p.29).

## **2.2 Commercialization of Women's Reproductive Capacity**

According to Makinde (as cited in Agunloye, 2019), the socio-ethical concerns regarding exploitation in the baby factory business are premised on asymmetric vulnerability, the commercialization of women's reproductive capacity to suit individualistic motives, and the colonization of the female body. Some women willingly patronize the baby factory operators because of the financial benefit they hope to derive from their clandestine business. By so doing, such women have contributed to the growth of the industry, which finally results in physical, psychological, and sexual violence to the victims. Currently, human trafficking and exploitation are the most lucrative and fastest growing sources of income for some secretly organized criminal organizations around the world (Ocan et al., 2022, p. 196).

## **2.3 Vulnerability, Poverty and Ignorance**

Poverty, school drop-out, and ignorance in many dimensions seem to be the major reasons why the teenage girls who are victims of these factories succumb to the pressure of producing babies for the baby factories. The babies are innocent victims, ignorant of the predisposing conditions in their new world.

## **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a textual analytical method in the sense that data for analyses are sourced from Salami-Agunloye's selected play, *Disposable Womb*, which depicts the trend and effects of human trafficking and sex slavery in Nigeria. The researchers used close reading of the selected text as the main method employed to get information. Thus, the selected text, *Disposable Womb* (2022), which is our primary source of data, was closely read to fish out the negative effects of human trafficking and baby factory operations as depicted in the play.

## **4. Disposable Womb**

### **4.1 Textual Analysis/Findings**

Irene Isoken Agunloye is a playwright and screenwriter, as well as a professor of African Gender, African Theatre and Film Studies, and Women's Studies. She is one of Nigeria's leading female playwrights. Some of her published plays include *Emotan* (A Benin Heroine) (2001), *The Queen Sisters* (2002), *More Than Dancing* (2003), *Sweet Revenge* (2004), *Idia, the Warrior Queen* (2008), and *Disposable Womb* (2022). Her plays interrogate issues that boarder on tradition, youth, and women's development. Her most recent play, *Disposable Womb*, centres on the clandestine baby factory phenomena in Nigeria.

*Disposable Womb* is a story about Zona, a high-school graduate, set-in present-day Nigeria. Zona, the daughter of Idah and Mina, is admitted to study medicine in England. As she prepares to travel, she discovers that she is nine weeks pregnant. This devastates Zona. Immediately, she tells her boyfriend Nosa about this development. In the process, Zona is kidnapped, blindfolded, and taken to the Baby factory in the middle of a forest. When the blindfold is removed from her face, she is shocked to see many young girls, some at different stages of pregnancy and others who are not pregnant, all cramped into a dingy room. Here, she is shocked to discover that Nosa is a criminal in the baby factory kidnapping gang who impregnates girls at will to produce 'commodities' for their baby factory. At this stage, she realizes that she is in trouble. She pleads with Nosa to contact her parents, but he assaults her and disregards her plea instead. At night, Nosa and his gang rape the girls at this squalor of a baby factory. Ironically, Zona's aunt, Yuwa, is tormented by her husband, Robosa, and mother-in-law, Iro, because she is childless. As a result, she is eventually driven out of her home. Zona and her friends make two attempts to escape, but Nosa and his gang foils their attempts and intercept them. They return Zona and her friends to the factory. On one such occasion, one of the girls is shot dead as she tries to escape. Eventually, Zona escapes from the factory with her longtime childhood friend Ede, whom she reconnects with at the baby factory. While on the run, Zona falls into labor, and she delivers a baby. Nosa, who has been searching for them, stumbles on Zona, who is recovering from child birth stress, and he kidnaps her baby. As they continue their escape, Zona and Ede are kidnapped again by the deadly Fulani militia. Fortunately, the police arrive on the scene, and they are released. The policemen also catch up with Nosa and take hold of the baby.

Nosa is shot dead as he attempts to escape. Zona reunites with her parents and gives Yuwa her baby as her adopted child.

In *Disposable Womb*, Agunloye presents the plight of young girls who are kidnapped and taken to a baby factory where they are forced to produce babies for sale or trafficking. These girls are kept in an enclosure, which in many ways can be likened to a prison where they are sexually abused. They remain there until the day they give birth, and the babies, afterward, are sold to willing buyers. This is the experience of Zona, the protagonist of this play. A promising young girl who has just been offered admission to study Medicine at the University of Leads suddenly discovers that she is nine weeks pregnant. As she goes to inform her 'boyfriend' Nosa about this unwelcome development, she is kidnapped, blindfolded, and taken to the Baby factory in the middle of a forest. This is how Zona finds herself in a baby factory where young girls between 13 and 25 years "are made to breed children for the operators who sell these babies at exorbitant prices" (*Disposable Womb*, p.17). The following coded conversation between

Nosa and Ivie reveals the modus operandi of the operators of the clandestine baby factory business as well as the prices of their commodities:

Ivie: Good afternoon. I got your number from your former client, Mrs Idehen.

Nosa: Oh yes, she was our client...You are Madam Ivie, right?

Ivie: Yes. Do you have any available?

Nosa: Yes, we have both cockerels and hens. We are expecting more.

Some are due to hatch this week and some next week.

Ivie: How much do they cost?

Nosa: Cockerels are 3.5, and hens 2.5...

Ivie: We will be there next week to make our choice.

Nosa: Please give me a call before coming so we can facilitate your passage.

We operate under very tight security. (*Disposable Womb*, p.45)

The above conversation has shown that the baby factory business is indeed a clandestine business that is conducted under tight security. The operators of the business and their clients speak in coded language, which only the initiates of the "cult" understand. Cockerel, for instance, is the name given to baby boys, while hens are the baby girls. Like the hens, Nosa describes the process of giving birth to babies in the factory as hatching. The playwright further unveils the agonizing experiences of the baby factory victims, who are not only sexually abused but often beaten mercilessly. Anybody who fails to cooperate with them could be killed. For instance, Nosa shot Tama dead for making an attempt to escape. Yaba, one of the pregnant girls, also commits suicide just to end the trauma she and other victims are going through. It is important to note at this juncture that these young girls found themselves in the factory through Nosa's deceptive schemes. He told Ede that he was taking her to Europe to train her as a hairdresser. He also told Runa that he was taking her to a make-up school in Lagos. Yaba fell into Nosa's trap when he promised to marry her. Nosa deceived the young girl by telling her that he would take her to the University of Ibadan, where his uncle is the Vice Chancellor, and he would later marry her after her graduation. This is how women fall prey to the sweet-coated tongues of wicked men. Nosa is not only a great liar; he is a sadist who takes pleasure in the dehumanization of his unsuspecting victims.

Although the baby factory business, which is seen as a new form of human trafficking, is considered a human rights violation because it impinges on the general well-being of young girls and boys, the business has continued to flourish in Nigeria. Some of the reasons for this ugly trend are highlighted in Agunloye's *Disposable Womb*. The major factor is the poor manner in which childless women are treated in society. In most African societies, an infertile woman is often demonized. She is regarded as a witch, a whore, a "man," vicious and wicked. She is subject to oppression, relegated to the margin of humanity (Agunloye, 2019p. 22). Robosa, for instance, calls his wife Yuwa a witch because she has no child. Fuming out of anger while searching for Yuwa, he shouts:

Robosa: Where is she? Where is the barren woman?  
Where is that witch called Yuwa? (*Disposable Womb*, p. 9).

When Yuwa demanded to know the offense she committed to deserve the type of treatment meted out to her, she received the worst replies:

Yuwa: Robby, why are you doing this to me?  
After all, we have been through together? Tell me, Robby,  
What offense did I commit to deserve this treatment?  
Ronosa: You are childless.  
Yuwa: Robby, is childlessness a sin? Is it an offense?  
Iro: Yes, in Africa, it is a sin. It is a big offense...  
Zona: Uncle Rob, what is the meaning of this drama?  
Why are you doing this to my aunty? You are treating her like a criminal.  
Robosa: Of course, she is a criminal. Guilty of infertility, of childlessness.  
Your aunty is barren. Is that not a crime? She has never been pregnant.  
Never missed her period once since I married her. (*Disposable Womb*, p. 11)

Finally, Yuwa is thrown out of their marital home because she is childless. This is the plight of most women who are childless in Nigeria. As a result of these negative attitudes of society towards childless women, they are forced to go all out in search of babies. Of course, the baby factory provides a ready market for such distressed women who are seeking babies.

Zona, the protagonist of the play, conscientizes the girls at the factory with the intention of liberating themselves from the trauma of being in the baby factory. She encourages the girls, saying: " Sisters if we are determined to be set free, we can do it. Our destiny is in ours. No one will fight our battle for us. We have to rise up and face the task masters squarely or remain in captivity for ever."(*Disposable Womb*, p.47). This appears to be the voice of the playwright speaking through her protagonist. Women are also subjected to oppressive and dehumanizing widowhood practices, especially in Africa. These Practices vary from one culture to another, and they include sleeping on the bare floor, shaving the hair on the head and the pubic area, eating from broken calabash, etc. (Eziechine, 2023, p. 57). In *Disposable Womb*, Ivie notes that when her husband died, the whole village came to drive her out of her home. They ordered her to park out her things and to give them all the papers to their properties.

Apart from the challenges of motherhood that force women to patronize baby factories, some women who are human merchants go there for commercial gain. Ivie, for instance, is said to be an addicted human trafficker who "has no sympathy for anyone; all she sees in people is money. She monetizes everything and every opportunity... She can sell her child for money."(*Disposable Womb* p.56). The DPO asked her what happened to her late husband and what killed him. The DPO further reveals that the police have uncovered the facts concerning the man's death. By implication, the DPO is saying that Ivie might be responsible for the husband's death. Ivie also lured Yuwa against her wish to patronize the baby factory. When the police catch up with them, Yuwa queries Ivie thus: Why Ivie? Why did you get me involved in all this? Don't I have enough problems already? (*Disposable Womb*, p. 57). Nosa, the baby merchant, finally meets his waterloo as he is shot dead by the police while trying to escape. The playwright laments the patriarchal system of obligatory motherhood and admonishes couples with infertility problems to present themselves for medical investigation instead of blaming the women for infertility. When a case of infertility has been established, the couple can decide to use genuine and legal means to adopt children, get assistance to conceive, or use a surrogate.

## **5. Conclusion**

Baby factory operation is a form of human trafficking that constitutes a serious human rights concern considering the victimization of both women and children who are molested and assaulted. It involves the exploitation, commercialization, and colonization of the female body. In Nigeria, the factories have continued to thrive illegally. This paper examined the problems of the illegal transaction and trafficking of infant babies. Some of the reasons why the clandestine business has continued to thrive include the issues of traditional/obligatory motherhood, commercialization of women's reproductive capacity, the vulnerability of women, poverty, and ignorance, among others. The paper advocates the need for policies that will respect women's reproductive choices as well as reproductive justice that recognizes individual's reproductive freedom. The paper, therefore, recommends that the business of human trafficking and baby factory operations in Nigeria be completely eradicated.

## **Statement/Declaration**

"Baby Factory Syndicate: An Emerging Trend of Trafficking in Agunloye's *Disposable Womb*."

We, the authors of the above title, hereby declare that the article is our original work and has not been published elsewhere. We also state herein that all sources used in this study were dully acknowledged.

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