

Contemplating Slavery and Internal Slavery in Women's Life through Ayesha Harruna Attah's Novel, the Hundred Wells of Salaga

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Abstract

It is interesting to note that slavery was not just a single affair. Salaga, the busiest slave market in Ghana, Africa is famous for slave trading. Slavery and Internal Slavery is one issue that the Africans cannot get rid of. Throughout history, it can be seen and heard that the suffering of men and women during Slave trade stands as a horror that shocks their entire life. Even after the abolition of Slavery in Africa, slave trade was carried out internally. Though human enslavement was not the primary reasons of the Europeans while trading; but gradually along with goods and commodities men, women, children became the victim of trading. Women, generally considered as the subordinate, gender extensively suffered a lot during this slave trade. Attah's major characters Aminah and Wurche apparently reflect the social lives of two different Ghanaian women. They both suffer at different levels. Aminah of slavery faced by the general mass and Wurche of her own family. The hardship, struggle and resilience of these two young women in the novel serves as examples of women who stand miserable during such challenging times. Therefore, the paper attempts to contemplate on the lives of women during slave trade, coming from different social backgrounds. The paper bases its back on Ayesha Harruna Attah's The Hundred Wells of Salaga.

Keywords: Slave Trade, Slavery, Internal Slavery, Hardships, Women, Discrimination.

Introduction

The term slave or slavery can be understood in many different ways and at different levels. For instance, in this case, it is the enslavement of human beings for their personal benefit. Slavery has been one of the worst inhuman and injustice faced by mankind in the human history. It has led to massive killing, sexual harassment, human trading, forced labour and migration of people from one place to another. Slavery is a condition where the poor marginalized people are enslaved by rich people to work for the expansion of their own personal, economic or financial benefit. Slaves are deprived of the right to exercise their voice and liberty. They are like puppets in

the hands of slave owners. In earlier times slavery existed in different parts of the world, however, with independence, many countries have abolished the practice of slavery. Human beings are sold as commodities, based on their strength, height, colour, age and body. They are made to work like machines both in the sun or rain the whole day without any rest. Slaves are divided into different categories and based on it they are made to work. Mac Munn (1970), says that slavery or slave trading has been there “since the beginning of time, and ever since stronger races learnt how to prey on the weaker.” The economically weaker section of people can be seen as the major victims of slavery apparently because they have no other option left than to work and sustain themselves even at the cost of suffering or being killed. It is the worst form of human exploitation. Inter-Slavery or Internal Slavery can be seen in relation to slavery. It is a situation where a little powerless people have to undergo slavery in the hands of power holders, leaders or heads of the home or any organization. Internal slavery is also practiced everywhere. It is associated with social hierarchies and class system where some minor groups of people are expected to fulfil the demands of the elites. Diene (1998), defines slave trade as “the greatest tragedy in human history.”

Slavery and Inter-Slavery in Ghana, Africa

The practice of slavery can be seen everywhere across the globe; however, the African continent has experienced extreme level of slavery extensively. Aristotle (1958), expresses his view on slave domination stating that “the part and the whole, like the body and the soul have an identical interest; and the slave is a part of the master in the sense of being a living but separate part of his body.” Human enslavement was carried out on large scale in Africa. Men, women, children of different categories went through the harsh process of slavery. Even pregnant women were not spared. Africa as a continent in the pre-colonial Ghana was full of resources. It was famous for gold and ivories. Initially, the Europeans set their eyes on the African land to export these resources to their own nations; however with the passing of time, they initiated the trading of human beings because of plantation and agriculture and that was how slavery began in Africa. Slavery existed longer in the African nations than on any parts of the continent. In Africa, slavery was practiced inhumanly, men women and children were displayed and sold as items in the market. The slaves are even auctioned. Based on their physique, they are sold at high prices. Strong and young men and women are sold for commercial purpose while the weaker ones are sold for domestic purpose. Slaves are beaten like animals and are punished by slave owners if any mistakes are done by them. They are fastened with chains and shackles, handcuffed and taken to slave markets to be sold. They are also gifted to kings in order to honour them. Benedict G. Der in his work *The Slave Trade in Northern Ghana* clearly narrates,

They were usually chained together in groups of ten to fifteen by the neck and exposed the whole day from morning till evening in the burning sun. They were

left hungry and thirsty, naked, ailing, often sick and weak and were kept standing in that condition till one after the other had been sold. (Der, 1998, p.12)

In Ghana, Salaga and Assin Manso in the northern and central region respectively, happen to be the busiest slave trading market in Africa. It was the main region of British slave trade. It was built by the Portuguese in the year 1482. According to Boahen (1975), “this trans-Atlantic slave trade began with the arrival of the Portuguese on the coast from 1470 onwards and later on followed by the French, the English, the Dutch and the Danes.” They are apparently said to be the first to engage in the Atlantic Slave Trade. As the Europeans were rich, they would come loaded with goods and trade for slaves in return. The Europeans were in need of large number of slaves for them to work in the plantation field. They grow cotton, sugar, indigo, tobacco, rice etc. The irony is that the rich Africans would often kidnap the poor and marginalised native people to sell them to the Europeans slave traders. According to Barbot (1732), “the trade in slaves is the business of kings, rich men and prime merchants.” This trading business however turned into a tension when mass kidnapping and violence began to take place in the name of trading. Slaves raiders would make alliances with the head members of the village in order to make the best purchase. The Europeans also established castles, forts and ports for the purpose of slave trading. When slaves are transported by ships, they are not allowed to come out easily. Because of lack of proper sanitization inside the ships, many slaves die of diseases. They are also thrown in the sea when they are sick, and others commit suicide for the fear of white people and the new life that will follow. Sometimes the ships are also attacked by pirates and many of the slaves gets killed. The lives of slaves in Ghana was not an easy one. They are definitely looked down as they belong to the lowest category of people. Slaves are given different identity and even at present, the children of slaves still bear the name of slaves though slavery has been legally abolished long time back. As slaves, they are not given any personal freedom. They are not allowed to read or write. Some slave owners do not even allow their slaves to eat. They beat them with iron rods between their cheeks to prevent them from eating. They are given scraps from their master’s table. The other thing that can be seen was the high death rates of slaves because of hard labour in plantation, and to fill up those gaps, young female slaves who reaches thirteen years of age are impregnated by slave owners to increase slave population. Ghana shares the darkest history of slave trading across the whole world. Akpabli (2011), states “Northern Ghana’s linkage with the Trans-Atlantic trade is too strong to be taken lightly.”

The practice of internal slavery in Ghana was also seen during that period. Internal slavery was prevalent among the Africans. The rich and power holders of the society are the ones who carry out internal slavery. They would exercise their supremacy by selling their own people in the market. Perbi (2004) has spoken about the existence of slavery that “institution of domestic slavery” existed in Ghana since

the seventeenth century. They would strip off the clothes of their own fellow brothers and sisters to advertise them in the best possible way to attract buyers. They are kept in the sun from morning till night in hunger. Additionally, they are also made to work for the rich masters for their personal benefits. Internal slavery was also seen among the families, where women were strictly asked to adhere to the orders given by the head of the house. Most of the time internal slavery was also seen in regards to women. Even royal women were not liberal from attaining freedom. They definitely had to listen to the royal male members of their society. They also face slavery as being slaves of the males. Apparently, women were sold off or set for forced marriages for the benefits of attaining power or strengthening the relationships among countries in order to make profits from different ends. One of the main reasons of carrying out internal slavery was to gain power. Basically, the so-called leaders or power holder's motives were to buy arms from the Europeans to strengthen their army so that they can use it for fighting against their neighbouring countries for the expansion of their own nations. For this reason, the leaders or powerful people look for the weak and powerless people in their society to sell them. This was how internal slavery began. It is indeed sad to learn that in some interior parts of Africa, slavery and internal slavery is still being carried out illegally.

Women and Slavery in Ghana

It is sad to learn that women are the subject of abuse and torture in any types of violence. Women are mercilessly molested, raped, enslaved or killed. They are forced into prostitution, trafficking and sold from place to place. They are separated from their loved ones. Jacobs (2016), in her speech of 1861 said "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women." During the slave trade in Salaga, Ghana, being a woman was like a curse as besides forced labour, they are discriminated and exploited because of their gender and colour. When the abolition of slave trade came into force in 1807 in the British Empire, slavery declined, but what was more heart-breaking was that the demand of slaves began to increase and as a result, the pressure began to fall more on the women to produce more children for commercial purpose. Women are also not given any medical treatment during the whole process of pregnancy and as a result many women lost their lives. Some women die at childbirth. Women are not even allowed to keep their own children. They are asked to sell their children off after reaching certain age. Some women have to share their husband with several other women. Women slaves are highly valued even though their prices are generally higher than that of male slaves because for slave owners it is like an investment for the future. In Salaga market, Ghana, along with male slaves, women slaves are also sold. They are displayed in the market shamelessly by their clothes being stripped off. It is also said that there are more numbers of female slaves than of male slaves. Enslaved women sometimes are used for domestic works like cooking, cleaning, washing and to look after white children. Women are seen as subaltern, otherized and looked differently.

Spivak (2016), states “subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow.” Just because they are women, they are not respected and they are ill-treated. Being a woman in itself is like a slave for many women because men generally considers women as a weaker gender and consider them as inferior, which is why Simone de Beauvoir (2015), argues and says that “one is not born a woman, but becomes one” in her book *The Second Sex*. The question is why women must undergo all these oppression and dominance when by birth men and women are not classified on the basis of gender. It is only after birth that society categorizes them as male and female.

The suffering of women can be analysed in terms of gender-based violence. Gender based violence, in the simplest manner can be understood as an attack or target carried out against any type of gender, be it male, female or young children during any kind of violence. In most cases of violence or attack in the history of the world, women have been seen as the victim of majority of such cases. Because of weaker physical strength, most of the time women are the easy target. Gender-based violence is also seen in the case of men and young children sometimes. When it comes to slavery, it was never gender-based. Slavery was carried out as a whole considering men, women and children. However, when it comes to *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* the author tries to throw light on the suffering of women in particular. Harruna Attah talks about slavery in her novel but her main intention is to bring out the suffering of women during slavery. Women, besides being just sold as slaves, had to undergo sexual assaults in various form; so compared to men, women suffer more in general. The root cause of the sexual assault of women is directly or indirectly connected to patriarchy. Like many nations in the world, most Ghanaian also follow the patriarchal structure of family, and in a patriarchal society it is common to see the dominance of men over women. In such society, women have certain restrictions and their freedom is limited only up to some point. Men are most of the time seen as the maker or leader and women as follower. As such, women are supposed to be under the shadow of men and to say yes to all kinds of oppression made against them. Also, there is a false notion about women at work, Horton (1868) in his book *West African Countries and Peoples* says “If a steady and continuous work is required to be done, the female population are the best to be employed.” Women have no right to raise a voice against the so-called male gender or patriarchy. Taking this advantage, women are sexually assaulted at home, in society and even at a larger stage. Knowing that women are by nature weak and must obey as they say, sexual molestation, rape, kidnapping and killing are seen as common cases in times of any kind of situation. Attah in the novel clearly portrays the molestation of Aminah and her sisters by the slave raiders who takes them away to slave markets to be displayed and sold. Aminah’s struggle story is just a small part that Attah highlights in the context of slave trade. The larger picture is the hardship of the many women who became the victim of slave trade. Many women were sexually assaulted, raped, impregnated, and even killed during the slave trade in Ghana. Attah’s characters also shows the power of resilience. In case of

Aminah, though her father was just a shoe maker, it did not stop her to stay within her poverty-stricken world. She moved on with her sisters to make their own money. Even when the girls were touched inappropriately, they feared no evil. They never gave up on themselves. Even when they were kidnapped and taken away to be sold in the slave market, facing all kinds of harassment, sold many times to different men, yet they kept the zeal to fight back every obstacle that came their way. Wurche, on the other hand is also a strong woman, though she was not sold as a slave, her life was no lesser than one of those. She had limitations on everything that she wishes. As a woman she had to unhappily and unwantedly accept all that her father wanted her to be. She was a royal princess but she had to compromise it in order to please the higher authority that is the male figure or patriarchy in precise. She was a slave in the hands of patriarchy.

Contemplating Slavery and Internal Slavery in Women's Life through Ayesha Harruna Attah's the Hundred Wells of Salaga

The Hundred Wells of Salaga is a novel written by the Ghanaian author Ayesha Harruna Attah. The novel was first published in the year 2018. The title of the novel signifies slavery. The 'Hundred Wells' literally represents the hundred wells that are there in Salaga. The wells are dug and built by the slaves when slavery was at its peak. Some of the wells are still there at present times, others have been covered up. The purpose of digging those wells was to serve both the slave owners and the slaves. Some of the wells were used for drinking purpose, and some for washing and bathing of the slaves. The wells were dug and built with different measurements. The wells of the slave owners are basically bigger than the wells used by the slaves. The novel, on the surface level is mainly concerned with the history of Ghana, particularly of the slave trade in Ghana, but when delved deeper Attah tries to find out the reasons of how her own great-great-grandmother landed up as a slave in Salaga market. Talking about slavery, Africa is one continent that comes in the minds of people, however, very few people talk about internal slavery though it is the same as slavery that prevailed. Wurche's case in the novel is one perfect example of internal slavery among royal families in African Courtly society. Apparently, what usually happens in royal families stays within their society. Attah wants this issue about internal slavery, to reach out to people worldwide as much as slavery does.

In the novel The Hundred Wells of Salaga, Slavery and Internal slavery are represented by the Characters Aminah and Wurche. Aminah and Wurche are the two important major characters in the novel. The novel is set in pre-colonial Ghana. Attah brings the resilience of slavery and internal slavery through the two women coming from different walks of life. There is a vast gap between these two characters, based on their background from where they have come from, but being a woman means a yes to go through the same type of hardships. No doubt there have been many African male writers writing about slavery and of female slaves, however a woman writing about

women's suffering is where the true experiences comes from. Attah deals with the horrors of slavery through the women presented in the novel. Aminah is the eldest daughter of a shoemaker. She lives in Botu with her parents and twin sisters. She is a hardworking young woman who tries to extend a helping hand to her father. Though she is just fifteen years old, she dreams of seeing the world. Even if it is difficult for her to get all that she wished for, she tries her best to fulfil those dreams by selling food to the caravans with her twin sisters, but unfortunately along with her sisters she is kidnapped by slave raiders and sold into slavery. Aminah is sexually assaulted by the men who come by the caravans to buy food from her. Those men touch her in an inappropriate way and talk to her sexually when Aminah asks one of the men on how he likes the porridge. Attah (2018) states,

He put his hand on her thigh and the pad of his fingers settled on her the way one's feet steady themselves on new ground: on tiptoes at first, and then with all of one's weight. His thumb and forefingers pinched the cloth covering the flesh on her thighs and then he found the opening of her wrapper and his thumb made a contact with her skin. (Attah, 2018, p. 10)

She grabbed his bowl and hurried to gather those that had been left on the ground, "Hassana Husseina," she shouted, running to them. (p. 10)

For women slavery is even more than being a slave, they get assaulted, molested, raped and all these traumas in return haunt them in every phase of their lives. As Barbara Ann Schapiro (1995), mentions in her work *Literature and the Rational Self* that "the worst atrocity of slavery, the real horror of the novel exposes not physical death but a psychic death." Aminah's kidnappers did not only kidnap her but set the entire village on fire. She could feel the heat even after she has moved far away and the tallest tree appeared to be the size of a branch. Tired of dealing with pain at one point, Aminah even felt like killing herself will be more peaceful than dealing with those monsters. Hassana, Aminah's sister was also raped by the horseman. Aminah tried to protect her but she could not. Coming from a shoe maker's family, and being the eldest daughter, Aminah had a big responsibility of taking care of her family, but unfortunately, she became the victim of slavery.

When Aminah is sold into slavery she had to become the mistress of a slave owner named Wofa Sarpong who bought her. In the household of Wofa Sarpong, Aminah is forced to work as a domestic worker and sexually molested. Aminah was sold again by Wofa Sarpong to another man. She was kept in a room for four to five days. Like other girls, Aminah also washed herself in the wells of Salaga. While the girls were washing themselves, a man with long barrel gun stood beside them to guard them. Before Aminah could wear her clothes, Maigida, a landlord grabbed her and tried to touch her inappropriately. Aminah resisted but Maigida did not care. Aminah felt most exposed that particular day. Aminah was taken to Salaga market where Wurche saw her and bought her. She was taken to Wurche's house and was asked to look after Wurche's baby. Wurche was kind of jealous of Aminah at first, for she was

tall and beautiful, but later she realised that Aminah is kind-hearted and slowly they became like sisters, sharing each other's feelings which they cannot share with other people. Aminah's life as a slave is a reflection of many common women's miserable life. It depicts the hardships that women had to undergo for they cannot risk losing their lives by denying anything against the wishes of the slave owners. Aminah was poor but happy, however her life changed when she was kidnapped by slave raiders. From a day dreamer, she turned into a resilient woman. Although Aminah faced so many hardships, she did not give up on life. She faced every challenge with strength and bravery. Aminah's character is modelled upon Attah's own great-great-grandmother who was enslaved and taken to Salaga and the very fact that she personally visited Salaga herself in 2012 adds more reality to the presentation of the novel.

Wurche on the other hand is the daughter of a Kpembe chief Etuto. She belongs to a royal family and is a determined and strong woman. She likes to take part in the political affairs of her father's court. Even though she is a girl, she is interested in guns and shootings like her brothers, however she is restricted from certain things. She is outspoken, tough yet sensible woman. She lives with her father Etuto. Wurche's mother passed away when she was just a baby but she was fortunate enough to have a grandmother who taught her how to do all the household works. Though she is a princess she is not free from slavery. The slavery that she undergoes is Internal Slavery. Wurche and her family are slave owners but it is sad to learn that she had to go through internal slavery. Wurche is asked to marry the Prince of Dagomba by her father only for political gains. Although she is not in love with the Prince, she had no other option than to say yes to what her father wanted. Attah pen downs Wurche's anger vividly,

She awaited her wedding day with dread, like a slave waiting to be sold, sure the day would come, but not knowing when it would be. And Wurche was angry. When she asked for details she was only told it had to be an auspicious date. She didn't like the man who had been presented to her, who had already delivered the customary twelve pieces of Kola to ask her hand. Her anger, however, was not directed to Etuto and MMA, who had planned this; it was directed at herself, at how powerless she had let herself become. Even though she agreed to marry the Dagomba Prince, she still thought of ways to sabotage the wedding. Running away was the best way, but each plot she came up with crumbled like a moth-eaten smock when picked apart. (Attah, 2018, p.52)

It is very clear from the quotation that though Wurche is strong and active in her father's court, she is still not given any freedom to make or take any decision. She has to obey all her father's orders despite her wishes to run away from Asante, her native place. She feels powerless and helpless as she cannot do or say anything against anyone. Wurche was in love with Moro and they both shared a close relationship, but she was helpless and could not do anything. Her anger and emotions are meant to be

kept to herself as her father can do anything if she takes any stand. Attah (2018) writes, “If even she tried going there, they would tie her up faster than lightening and return her to Etuto” (p.53)

Wurche is compelled to marry the Prince of Dagomba and so she tells her father, “Etuto, I am entering this marriage for you” (Attah, 2018, p. 58) but that was not the end, she was even forced to undergo a virginity test. On the night of the wedding, older women prepared their bed with clean white bedsheet. Wurche’s life also changes like Aminah’s. She finds herself in an unhappy marriage after some point of time. As a woman Wurche had to bow down and agree on all the norms set by the society. Even after marrying the Prince of Dagomba, Wurche was not free, instead, she had to live under the control of her husband. At one point of time when Wurche wanted to join her father in the war against the British and Germans, she was denied by her husband to help her father. She became more miserable in her husband’s house. She was sometimes beaten mercilessly. She really wanted to divorce her husband and says that even a verse from their holy book Quran mentions that a woman can divorce her husband if he beats her. Wurche clearly states that she married her husband only to strengthen their alliance with Dagbon. Wurche’s character is an ironic representation of many royal women in Africa who enjoys all rights yet tied by many societal boundaries for being a woman. Examining her life, she herself was directly or indirectly involved in slavery. She buys slaves for her benefits. She also buys Aminah in the novel, however just because she is a woman, she is denied of certain decisions she can make.

Though slavery prevails and most marginalized women are controlled, yet there are many women like Wurche in the African society who holds high position, but the irony lies in the fact that they also go through internal slavery. Life is not easy for them either. As women, there are different stages of oppression which they must undergo, irrespective of whether one is a princess or a daily wage earner. Women means women, always under the dominance of men or higher authority. Analysing both the lives of Aminah and Wurche, it is apparent that they both undergo hardships and resilience, nevertheless it is clear that their struggle is associated with their own personal background. Aminah is the victim of first hand slavery while Wurche of her own people. The interesting turn in the novel is when Wurche buys Aminah. Their lives collide and they find a sisterly bond in each other. With time Wurche understands Aminah’s life and struggle because she also undergoes through the same under her father. At the end of the novel, the readers learn that Wurche eventually frees Aminah. It is her sensible nature and womanness that made her possible to free Aminah. Wurche says, “Aminah, you’re free” (Attah, 2018, p.224) and patted her back. Aminah in return, thanked her saying, “Thank you, Sister” (p.224).

Contemplating the life of Aminah and Wurche, it can be seen that though there are so many negativity and suffering, yet there is a balance that they developed in them at the end. Wurche proves her loyalty and kind nature by freeing Aminah. She

gives a new life and ray of hope to Aminah. Slavery and women's suffering have been talked about throughout history by many writers, however Attah gives her novel an unexpected turn that is on the basis of love and sisterhood; a slave owner, who is also a victim of internal slavery freed a slave whom she bought herself. Wurche stands as a strong and righteous woman, Aminah on the other hand, despite of going through series of oppressions, sold over and over again, yet remains humble and faithful to her masters. It is her humility that saved herself.

Conclusion

Women's life is a series of miserable events. Attah has tried to jot down all the hardships that women of different social classes went through during the slave trade in Salaga, Ghana. She has presented all the stages of women's life and sufferings. From Aminah and Wurche's childhood to growing up into beautiful young women, from falling in love, to getting married and having kids, with several hurdles that followed them. Attah's work can be considered as a representation of women's miserable life during slavery and Internal slavery. Many women were killed during the slave trade, while undergoing slavery, and people often chooses to remain silent when such topic arises probably because they do not want to recall what has been faced by the females. They feel it lighter and easier to forget than to bring up those issues. Attah realises how important it is to bring up the suffering of women because she hopes that there is still room for everyone and thus she gives a positive ending to her novel to set an example that goodness and kindness still prevails and that if needed, people can still create a beautiful place for everyone to live in harmony.

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