COMMENT

CONFRONTING TINA OKPARA’S TESTAMENT OF HORROR @UI

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The good thing about this disgusting story is that the perpetrators have paid dearly for it. Godwin Okpara, ex-Super Eagles footballer, his wife, Linda with whom he was convicted in a French court six years ago for enslaving their adopted Nigerian daughter, (Tina Okpara) have been serving prison terms. Okpara was sentenced to thirteen years imprisonment, later reduced to ten and his wife was sentenced to 15 while the wife’s aunt, tried as an accomplice to enslavement and torture, spent 18 months behind bars. All these played out in far away France 2007. Unconfirmed reports suggest Okpara might have been deported back to Nigeria by now after leaving a French jail house just last week. As at Sunday, it could still not be confirmed authoritatively from the Nigerian Embassy if Okpara was taken there last week preparatory to deportation. A Nigerian contact in Paris social circles who knows the Okparas very well said on Sunday night that Linda Okpara would be released this week.

The story of Tina Okpara will remain a sensational story for a long time because it touches the rawest part of our humanity. It is indeed tear-inducing at every point of it, whether you have met Tina or not. It is worse if you meet her probably because she also breaks down easily. That is totally understandable from a Nigerian girl adopted and taken to France at age 13 and, for five long years, subjected to unspeakable psychological, physical, moral and sexual torture by the adoptive parents until she was eighteen years and escaped from their cellar. The parents were subsequently
tried and jailed as summarized above. The story is back with us because Tina has come out with the English version of an explosive memoir titled *My Life Has a Price* in which she documented her experience in grisly details.

It requires courage to be able to finish reading the book. I have done so for the first and last time from cover to cover. It is a straightforward narrative. It took me three hours, 37 minutes, that long only because, at every dramatic point, I turned to my jotter and sometimes, I had to battle with tears. It is one thing to be familiar with the academic literature on child/women enslavement and the struggle for a global regime on that, it is another reality altogether to be confronted with the horrifying details of a particular case. Above all, this involves your countryman, an ambassador of Nigeria in his own right as a star footballer out there in Europe making Nigeria proud.

It is great that before he bowed to the majesty of the French law, he apologized to Tina but Godwin Okpara still needs to truly reconcile with Tina, perhaps in the full glare of Nigerians. That would complete this story of the conquest of evil by beauty, that is beauty in its philosophical sense.

Whatever happens, this story takes us back to why the African experience in history is always about suffering. Wherever she is, the African is an object of denigration, either by outsiders or by his or her own kith and kin. Child enslavement in quarries, plantations and sex cages is not suffered by the Africans alone but even then, there is an African dimension to it and Tina’s story illustrates that at the level of race, class and gender.

On Tuesday morning, November 20th, 2012, I had gone to see Professor Isaac Olawale Albert, the Director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan, to clear the way for me to disappear from the campus once again. He readily solved my problem but said there was an event he wanted me to attend at 11 o’clock that morning. As I stood at the entrance to the Administrative Block of the Institute waiting for the event to start, I noticed two particular women walking in. In style and carriage, one of them wasn’t typical and I took a long time looking at
her. If she noticed, she might have thought it a lustful objectification but it wasn’t. It was her solemnity. And her high heeled shoes. Our girls on campuses are too much of the “happening” mindset to be that solemn. And they don’t wear that sort of high heeled shoes on £ typical day on the campus. By this time, I had no idea she was the one we were waiting for and it passed like that. But when Prof called out to all to enter the hall for the event to begin and I entered Drapper Hall and sighted her on the High Table, that sight activated my journalistic antennae.

But it was still to take me much longer to get an idea of her story because when Professor Albert opened the floor, he said what the Institute of African Studies was interested in was to, in the way of academics, add value to Tina’s memoir by bringing three discussants to a roundtable on it. And throughout the presentation, nobody made any references to the content of the book. It was easy to guess that the content must be a too-hot-to-handle stuff I had sighted the book on Prof Albert’s table that morning but it didn’t strike me even with the author’s name boldly there. This is probably because, not being a soccer buff, I missed her story which was very sensational in Paris several years back.

Dakar based Sulaiman Adebowale, the Director of Amalion, the publishing company which came out with the English edition was asked to set the ball rolling. Adebowale told the story of how he came to know about the Tina story and the court sessions in France through fashion and lifestyle magazines his wife was, in his own words, always wasting her money buying and reading. The story was well reviewed in those publications but not in Nigeria. But for Mm, Tina is a microcosm. There are many other Tinas out there receiving dehumanizing treatment in the hands of sexual slave holders. That was how he got involved at his own level, culminating in an English edition of the work.

The first discussant, Dr. Willie Eselebor, a retired Assistant Comptroller of Immigration and Coordinator of Transborder Studies in the Peace and Conflict Studies programme of the university said taking minors for househelp outside and into Nigeria is a rising phenomenon
traceable to changing family processes. Tina type of story comes up when relations go sour, he
said. He made the point that the movement is both ways – from and into Nigeria but all in all,
Europe remains a destination of choice and enforcement failure is just one dimension of the
problem.

Dr. Sola Olorunyomi of Performance and Cultural Studies unit at the Institute drew
attention to how Robert Kaplan’s *The Coming Anarchy* may not be all racial propaganda if
environmental pressures on migration was not responded to creatively in the West African sub-
region because all the movements are, in the final analysis, underlined by search for better life,
depending on which group is involved-pastoralists, children, women, youths.

As far as Mrs. Bosede Iro-Nsi, Executive Director of Women’s Right and Health Project
is concerned, Tina has set a revolution in process by documenting her experience. Hers, she said,
is contrary to the disinclination of most victims of rape and enslavement to full disclosure. She
drew attention to another on-going practice in the churches called deliverance. There is no worse
torture than deliverance, she maintained. She spoke of asking a priest: every week you preside
over adoration to free this people. Have you ever asked why it is always female children who are
brought for the deliverance and never the children of those who bring them? Why is it always the
girl child that is Mammy Water or witch responsible for everything from business failure to low
sperm count?” She is still waiting for answers.

Eventually, Tina was given the floor to speak. Her French flows better than her English.
There are many things her English cannot capture. She noted how sexuality is not discussed in
Africa but rather a taboo. But she said she had to write the book because it was a therapy for her.
She spoke of the woman who wondered why she was disclosing so much. Her reply is that she
has lost everything. The question of shame is no longer there for her. People can think whatever
they like but the point, for her now, is to give a warning and save other Tinas out there. She is
not against people giving out their children to friends, family members but parents should
exercise caution. According to her, giving up your child to the person you think you know may not work out well and she says it doesn’t matter whether it is a boy or a girl.

She has decided her way forward. It is to be a nurse Tina currently works as a care giver. She does this part-time alongside preparing for nursing qualification which takes series of validation in France. It might be great to be a care giver, given her experience but wouldn’t it have been greater if Tina were to train to be a care giver beyond the limited number of persons she would come across in a care house? Methinks Tina should have taken advantage of the philosophically charged Frer eh educational tradition and take up to even a graduate degree in the humanities. She is still very young. That would strengthen her voice and, by implication, her capacity to be a greater force for good. Someone who survived her type of experience has got a peculiar kind of leadership training, particularly in will power and compassion for other human beings.

Tina’s experience is only possible in Europe. Even in the most sophisticated African urban centre, a neighbour or a distant relation or one gutsy do-gooder would pop up from nowhere and enforce her liberation. But individualism as a social article of faith made that impossible in Europe. Even those who somehow got to know what she was going through gave up immediately they discovered she was still a minor. They would firmly advise her to wait till she was 18. Each of the two occasions she managed to run away before the age 18, the police promptly sent her back to continue with the funeral of her innocence, her own expression in the novel. The law and the ass analogy again!

The novel offers very few clues as to why Tina suffered. But she was like a pawn in a game of cards in which the husband and the wife raced against each other. The more fierce the race, the more blows she received. Those who are able to read the book more carefully might just be able to complete this analogy for me.

At an exclusive session for her to grant an Ibadan media house an interview, Professor Albert asked her if she is a happy person now. She
said yes because she could cough or laugh or do whatever she wanted without anyone telling her to come off it. In other words, she is free. Albert brought the interview to a close by saying to her, “You have freed yourself by telling the story of your experience in a book”. This process of regaining her freedom will be completed when she successfully changes her name back to Tina Omaku. At the moment, that is not possible because she has yet to get French nationality. And so, she bears the name of her adoptive father, Godwin Okpara, which is what is in all her documents. Can there ever be a bigger ass than the law?