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The Dilemma of Prostitution and Ghanaian Prostitutes in Benjamin Kwakye's *The Sun by Night*

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Abstract

The Sun by Night (2005) by Benjamin Kwakye is a novel that explores the dilemma of prostitution and the experiences of Ghanaian prostitutes. The novel portrays the lives of three women who are forced into prostitution due to different circumstances. The novel highlights the challenges faced by these women, including physical and emotional abuse, the stigma attached to their profession, and their lack of control over their bodies and lives. Through the experiences of these women, the author sheds light on the harsh realities of prostitution and the impact it has on the lives of women. The novel also delves into the societal attitudes towards prostitution and the conflicting views on whether it should be legalized or not. *The Sun by Night* offers a thought-provoking commentary on the complex issues surrounding prostitution and highlights the need for a more nuanced and compassionate approach towards addressing the challenges faced by prostitutes.

Keywords: Dilemma, prostitution, Ghanaian prostitutes, Benjamin Kwakye, *The Sun by Night*

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Introduction

Female prostitution is probably one of the oldest professions in the world, but this is probably the most hated profession too. It is disliked in the sense that people who visit brothels enjoy the sex act, but in society, they pretend to otherwise regard this profession. It is hateful, risky, and harmful too. According to Ole Martin Moen, "A common argument against prostitution states that selling sex is harmful because it involves selling something deeply personal and emotional" (73). Moen also highlights that "prostitution is a complex practice deeply entrenched in a long line of other social and psychological issues, such as gender inequality, poverty, power hierarchies, and exploitation . . ." (81). Moen's study puts on a view that prostitution is interrelated with psychological problems and is harmful. It is cataclysmic to the mental and physical identity of those involved as it involves not only the selling of the body but at the same time selling of emotions too. Melissa Farley, in one of her studies on prostitution, observes that,

> In prostitution, it is the woman who is being consumed as a commodity who is at great risk, in spite of the fact that prostitution is sometimes (erroneously) described as 'sex between consenting adults.' Prostitution occurs because the person being consumed as product would not consent to sex with the buyer unless he paid for it. . . Thus, the notion that it is the consumer who is at risk for harm via consumption of a product is sometimes inappropriate and the model itself needs to be reframed. (97).

Farley's study on prostitution focuses on the fact that prostitution is an act of sexual relationships between adults with agreement regardless of the prostitutes facing troubles rather than the customers because they are treated as a product. Prostitution and the lives of prostitutes have always been controversial subjects and reflect differing viewpoints. Sarah Pudifin and Shannon Bosch opine that "Prostitution is always a controversial topic, and opinions on how it should be regulated are invariably polarized" (272). In addition, Anderson asserts that prostitutes, for whom the sex trade is a source of their livelihoods, have to face many conflict situations and pathetic conditions in the trade. He opines that the sex trade is harmful to public health as well.

The perceptions of prostitution and prostitutes are based and centered on social and cultural values that differ from one society to another. Some societies have classed the sex trade as a recognized profession, but to other societies, it is unacceptable. The basic understanding of prostitution differs from one jurisdiction

to another. Though, in some places, this is illegal, while in other places, it is legal. In Ghana, prostitution is illegal, but many Ghanaians are unaware that it is prohibited.

The tale of prostitutes and prostitution is hardly an exceptional one, but for ages, in the course of their job, they face aversion and helplessness. The helplessness of prostitutes and the commodification of the sex trade have always fascinated painters, playwrights, poets, and litterateurs for centuries.

In *The Sun by Night*, Benjamin Kwakye underlines the dichotomy and dilemma of prostitutes by presenting the surroundings of a bordello, which practices prostitution and controls women. Kwakye depicts the negative and gloomy treatment of humans towards the prostitutes and sensitizes society towards the agonies, trauma, misfortunes, and miseries of the prostitutes. The novel presents a picture of prostitution in the capital of Ghana, Accra. It tells the story of a brothel, details, experiences, and consequences of the prostitutes' way of life. Kwakye's character, Ama Badu, is a lady who suffers from dissociative identity and lives a life of contradictory standards. She is a respectable juror of the protagonist's case and, at the same time a prostitute. In addition, Kwakye depicts many characters like Madam Beatrice, Araba, Akwele, Colonel Duah, Kubi Manu, and others involved in this trade as clients or sex workers. *The Sun by Night* portrays the painful phases of prostitution and the lives of Ghanaian prostitutes. Kwakye illustrates the attitude of society towards prostitutes and prostitution. The present study aims to analyze and showcase the risks, hassles, and challenging factors of prostitution to elucidate a clear insight into the sex trade depicted by Kwawye in the novel. The study also seeks to develop a conscious perspective of patriarchal society towards prostitutes' emotions as the society treats the prostitute as an object and puts a question mark on their existence as a human being. In addition, the present study suggests the question before the readers, whether practicing and proceeding with prostitution is right, even at the cost of the rights, emotions, and life of prostitutes.

The Dilemma of Prostitution

In *The Sun by Night*, Benjamin Kwakye mainly deals with the courtroom trial of the protagonist, Koo Manu, and the murder mystery of an Accra prostitute, Akwele. Benjamin Kwakye, a Harvard-trained lawyer born in 1967, hails from Accra, Ghana, and is the winner of the 1999 and 2006 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for both the first and second novel, *The Clothes of Nakedness* (1998) and *The Sun by Night* (2005). His proficiency is limited not only in the field of the writing genre

novels, but also in poetry, novellas, trilogy, and short stories. The picture of his prolific and productive writings is visible in his every published literary work.

Scholars and researchers observe and relate Kwakye's novel, *The Sun by Night* as a study of social realism, mystery, women and trade, post-colonial issues, and the culture of Ghanaian society. For instance, Michael Perry Kweku Okyerefo opines that the narrative is centered on the ". . . structure of social relationships among Ghanaians in the light of the country's socio-political trajectory. . . *The Sun by Night* portrays the vicissitudes of the day-to-day life of Ghanaians" (138). Okyerefo's study also presents the facts that, "*The Sun by Night* shows that what is true of drama can be true of prose as well, meaning that creative literary art gives us a credible insight into society. If life is theatre, theatre is life" (153). The present study describes that Kwakye's novel portrays social issues and political problems. It also depicts the social milieu and structure of African society. It seeks to show that Kwakye's *The Sun by Night* is concerned with the social life of the people in Ghana.

In another study, Gyasi focuses that, "Right from the start, from the prologue, readers are presented with a tale and by the end of the novel, it is expected that the reader would have unravelled the mystery surrounding the whole tale" (1). Gyasi also describes that the novel of Kwakye, apart from the mystery of murder, deals with themes like sex, scandal, social conflicts, political skulduggery, and colonial experiences also. Palmer emphasizes it as, "a truly epic work encompassing the vast span of events and issues in post-colonial Ghana . . ." (127). Palmer opines that the novel of Kwakye deals with the consequences of issues related to the emotional state of characters and Ghanaian society and can bring a new direction for novels/ fiction of African literature.

In a study, Mandal and Rahman deal with the Pragmatic Study/Analysis of Benjamin Kwakye's novel, *The Sun by Night*, to present the gloomy side of 'Polygyny'. Mandal and Rahman highlight the ruinous condition of women and the hassles they have to face due to the implementation of the plural form of marriage. The study also focuses on the impacts of the plural form of marriage on Ghanaian women.

Moreover, Marcus Power reviews that *The Sun by Night* is a notable and remarkable narrative in many ways, concerned with the interpretation of various social issues like a psychological peculiarity of characters, polygamy, prostitution, and the like. Power states,

> Kwakye explores the social and psychological causes for the bizarre behaviour of most of the characters in the novel and he is not afraid to tackle the important issue of polygamy from both female and male points of view. Kwakye also includes a very thorough exploration of the causes, nature and consequences of prostitution (529).

Power concludes the assessment with the information that Kwakye's *The Sun by Night* is concerned with practical and factual social issues that focuses on the noxious nature of present-day trading relations of Africa.

Kwakye's *The Sun by Night* starts with a courtroom trial of the protagonist Koo Manu. He is a moneyed businessman and a former politician of Accra, Ghana, who stands accused as a murderer of Akwele, an Accra prostitute. But in point of fact, the author presents the court trial as a frame through which the protagonist explores various issues that the novel deals with as the reasons and consequences of prostitution, the position of women in a male-dominated culture, polygyny, post-colonial issues of Ghana, factual social issues and many others. Moreover, the title of the novel also makes the readers tuned in to the possibilities that the author intends to explore mysterious settings. The riddle/mystery of the prostitutes' murder and the painful story of prostitution are witnessed from the exordium portion, explained by the journalist of Koo's trial case, Nii,

> A tale of social meanings and political shenanigans, economic strain and spiritual jests. A yarn of death and the smell of scandal and sex; two lawyers (one a former candidate for parliament, the other a lauded prosecutor); a lady of ill repute (and for her, I will reserve further judgment for now, given my own attachments to be unearthed later); and a businessman and politician (Kwakye 3).

The novel is full of mystery, contradictory voices, and the seamy reality of prostitution. There are picturization, troubles, and dilemmas of Ghanaian prostitutes and prostitution as significant themes of the novel. It focuses on the connection of prostitution with violence and mistreatment and explores the effects of the regulation of prostitution on the exploitation of sex workers. It is based on the reasons and consequences of prostitution, the murder mystery of the prostitute, and the dual personality of Ama Badu. In this study, the main focus is on the story/narration of Ama Badu, the main character of the novel to present the scenarios of uncertainty, conflict prospects, and problems faced by prostitutes and show how contextual utterances and discourses make readers aware of the stages of prostitution. The

phase deals with Ama's details with the tale of her double-standard life to the readers, that is to say, her experiences as a respectable juror and a disreputable prostitute. Ama introduces herself with the statement, "Whether animate or inanimate or nocturnal or diurnal, seemed of no importance" (Kwakye 15). Her discourses present the phases of the dilemmas of prostitutes. She details the struggle of her choice between emotions and reality and between 'I' and 'you'. She narrates that she always lived in fear of what would happen when society discovered the reality of her double-standard life, so she is always careful and cautious about her second profession,

> Your peers would not take too kindly to the second profession you had chosen, and so far you had succeeded in keeping it secret. But you always dreaded that you would be discovered some day and you had to tell yourself that life is a risk (Kwakye 15-16).

Ama's further interactions with herself again present the picture of her stress and risks associated with her split life standard. She was scared of the thought that what would happen if her dual life standard will be exposed to her friends. Her fear regarding the consequences of being exposed highlights the risk and uncertain perspectives of the sex trade also. Ama shares,

> . . . your heart pounded with the itching fear that the building would collapse one day while you were in the act itself . . . and that the next day *The Accra Chronicler* would carry an article written by Nii Lamptey himself with the screaming headlines AMA BADU OF MINISTRY OF ECONOMIC PLANNING FOUND DEAD IN A BROTHEL. You wondered what your friends would say if that happened as many of them believed you were a walking specimen of virtue (Kwakye 16).

Ama's discourses, in like manner, present the quandaries of the sex trade. She narrates that after dealing with her fears, she enters the brothel for involvement in the sex act. She details to the readers the inside picture, the scenario of the brothel, and various aspects of prostitutes' lives. While entering the brothel, the first person Ama meets is Akwele, one of the prostitutes of the brothel, who holds her hand as if they are sisters. But, when the customers enter the brothel, Akwele leaves Ama's hand and engages in enticing them. However, Ama's fear of getting recognized by anyone stops her from doing so ". . . Akwele released your hand to welcome two men who had just entered the main chamber, while you looked up slowly because you could not afford to let anyone you knew recognize you" (Kwakye 17). Ama

also details the owner of the brothel, Madam Beatrice, a dissolute, profligate, and chubby woman to present a more accurate picture of a bordello and sex trade. She describes Madam Beatrice as a voluptuous and Junoesque lady who cleverly and cunningly leads the prostitutes and the brothel.

> Madam Beatrice . . . had a presence that grabbed respect without requesting it. She kept a hotel and restaurant close by that were frequented by the rich. . . . She had an amazing way of keeping track of the time each woman spent time with a customer so that she knew exactly how much money to expect at the end of the day (Kwakye 17).

After Madam's description, Ama narrates how she and other prostitutes deal with customers in the brothel to temp and entice them. She details the present phase to show the life and activities of the prostitutes. She details the process the prostitutes' act in this profession to earn a livelihood from this profession, although her case is different from others. Araba and Akwele captures the customers before the other prostitutes could attempt to fascinate and entice them. Ama, while engaged in observing the process of dealing with the customers by the prostitutes, is suddenly interrupted by a young customer. She then enters a room, as directed by Madam, to engage in a sex act with the young customer of hers as she always does with other customers. Ama Badu reports to the readers the way she engages and is active with her customers during sex acts. She details her sexual involvement with Colonel Duah and Kubi Manu, whose real identity is later discovered by her during the court case of Koo Manu, the protagonist. She also narrates how she and Kubi engage in sexual bursts of energy, and he never loses his rising intensity so that the sweat on his shaking body becomes a unified stream of glistening moisture, leaking carelessly from his flesh machine. At the close of the ". . . first burst of energy . . ." (Kwakye 18), she and Kubi have been engaging in formalistic talks for a while before involving in other rounds of sexual acts. Kubi finds the replies and the conversations engaging and captivating, and wants to know more about her. He asks Ama whether she does not feel this profession is shameful and cheap. On being asked by Kubi, Ama replies that for her, like other professions, prostitutes' job is also to satisfy their customers like doctors and lawyers though the way is different. However, her responses and strategy regarding the emotions of women involved in prostitution disappoint Kubi. So he continues to discuss the prevailing views of the people of society on the sex trade and prostitution. After they discuss the immorality of the trade, they engage in the second and third sexual commerce. Then Kubi dresses up and leaves the place,

stating that he has spent a delightful time with Ama and wishes to meet her again for more sex acts.

She also shares with the readers about her sex act with another customer, Colonel Duah, whom she meets at the brothel on a Friday night as a customer. Colonel Duah mainly chooses Araba and Madam, but on that night, he chooses Ama. She describes the sex act with Duah to present the fact that there is no room for choice in front of a prostitute but chosen by the customer as an object/product of pleasure only. Ama narrates to the readers that she enjoys sexual commerce with her customer, Kubi, but with Duah, she experiences a very bad time in bed because he is not a good performer. "The Colonel was a poor performer who did not seem to realize his shortcomings and therefore talked vociferously throughout the act about how he was giving pleasure and what a superb sex machine he was" (Kwakye 34-35).

Ama recounts that later again on, one Friday, Kubi comes to the brothel for her. They engage in sexual commerce first and then engage in a discussion on Ama's decision to pick up the profession of a sex worker. He asks her about the reason that lies behind choosing a profession like the sex trade, which discomforts Ama. On being asked by Kubi, Ama shares the story of her past life and also the reason behind her prostitution. She then shares the traumatic incident of her childhood which puts her in a conflict situation in life and makes her suffer from the problem of a split personality. She recounts that in her case, child abuse is the reason that lies behind choosing and involving in a profession like the sex trade,

> And much as I had tried to run from it, my mind returned to the memory of that friend of my parents who came to visit when I was nine years old . . . He turned off the light in the living room . . . He came closer to me and started touching me. . . . Even after he left, I was still very afraid . . . (Kwakye 37-38).

Ama continues that this traumatic incident was repeated by the man and left her with conflicting emotions that filled her with feelings of scared and violence. Ama shares with Kubi how after this traumatic incident, she begins to split herself between 'I' and 'you', which also makes her reckless and dare to choose the life of a prostitute. She further shares that after this incident, she becomes curious to know more about the process and is unable to stop herself from involving in the act of sex with different people. Thus narrating the details of her problems, fears and conflict feelings, she continues her narration with the phases of the uncertain lives of other prostitutes of Madam's brothel. She shares with the readers about the health risk

that prostitutes have to face in the sex trade. She narrates that on a Saturday afternoon when invited by Madam Beatrice, she visits Madam's house, where she and others become aware of the fact that Araba, one of the prostitutes of Madam's brothel, suffers from AIDS. She describes that suddenly the environment becomes tense and constrained when Araba discloses that she is suffering from AIDS. Araba's news once again not only makes Ama remind of the uncertainty and dilemmas of this profession. She becomes tense also because she has never gone to any doctor for an AIDS test and promised herself to go for an AIDS test.

Thus, after a detailed description of her split mind and self, about prostitution, and the challenging lives of prostitutes, Ama concludes her narration first with the shocking news of Araba's murder. It becomes hard for her to believe that Araba was killed, who had chosen the profession of prostitute only to take care of her family. Ama's narration regarding Araba's death once again presents the picture of the unsureness and uncertainty of the sex trade as well the insecure lives of prostitutes. It also highlights the pathetic condition of women involved in this trade and chooses it as their source of livelihood.

Ama further completes her narration with another piece of horrific news. She narrates that only a few days after Araba's death, one morning when she was at her home and reading the newspaper, she was shocked and awestruck by Akwele's death news. For a while, she was shocked by the news article, but later she was enraged and wanted to know much about the person ". . . who had been arrested for killing her" (Kwakye 71) and decides to ". . . become a juror in Akwele's trial . . ." (Kwakye 71) to get Akwele's murderer punished. In a way, Ama Badu ends her description of a double life as a character in a protest model who prefers to lead an independent life, regardless of society's rumours.

Thus, her narrations and interactions involve both first-person 'I' and the second-person 'you' as if she wants to keep her two identities separate from one another. Kwakye's idea of portraying Ama Badu with first and second-person narratives gives her a unique voice in the novel. Ama Badu's narration and discourses present a clear and detailed analysis of the troubled lives and uncertainty of prostitutes and the challenging factors of prostitution.

Conclusion

The present study has provided an overview of the dejected and traumatic condition of the emotional and physical health of prostitutes. Their unhappy and doleful picture, as presented in Kwakye's novel, supports the observations and studies on the dilemma

of prostitutes and prostitution. It supports Ole Martin Moen's views by depicting Ama's past and the death of the prostitutes and tries to convey the message to society that women who are sold and purchased as objects in this trade by brothel keepers and sex buyers also have emotions. *The Sun by Night* follows Melissa Farley's observations that in the sex trade, prostitutes who are used up as objects are at considerable risk, even though prostitution is an act of sex between adults with each other's consent. Kwakye's characters like Araba and Akwele are involved in this trade supporting that the lives of prostitutes are at far more hazard and risk than the customer or the sex buyer.

Moreover, Kwakye, through Ama's story, presents another bitter truth that when she was only nine years what happened to her was rape, but now those happenings are normal for her as she is a part of this trade. In short, where sexual assault is rape to others, it is normal to prostitutes. Thus, Kwakye by Ama's life and the lives of other prostitutes, presents the fact that even though women are forcefully purchased and brought by brothel-keepers in the trade, childhood abuse, family neglect, poverty, and emotional harm also are common reasons behind it. Kwakye portrays Ama Badu, the Juror, as a character who uses prostitution in *The Sun by Night* as a form of rebellion against a restrictive society, even if it comes with some severe consequences. Kwakye, by portraying the trouble and death of prostitutes, also supports Pudifin and Bosch's and Anderson's views that the lives of prostitutes are always a matter of controversy and intense suffering.

In addition, it presents the fact that there are so many things wrong with prostitution, including the way it represents women and how demeaning it can be. This study conveys the message that prostitutes are also human beings, not objects or products, and the society should sympathize with the traumatic condition of sex workers.

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