

# The Trope of Pensioners' Plight in Gabriel Marquez' *No One Writes To The Colonel* And Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

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## Introduction

From time immemorial, literature has been instrumental in the diagnosis of social maladies and restoration of normalcy in human society. Over the years, pensioners have been subjected to pains, frustration, endless hopelessness and death. Meanwhile, writers do not turn a deaf ear to the cry of this set of people. Such writers include Gabriel Marquez and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. This study, therefore, interrogates pensioners' plight as depicted in Marquez' *No One Writes to the Colonel* and Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* with a view to examining various challenges pensioners battle with when they are supposed to drop the 'sword', having laboured laboriously to serve their fatherland. The novelists employ their literary prowess to carry out a surgico-literary operation on the sickly human society where pains, frustration, despair, hopelessness, lack, sickness, leadership irresponsibility and non-responsiveness, moral decadence, poverty and spacelessness have become the characteristic features. Pensioners' plight is not a new phenomenon in the world.

Contemporary world literature has enthusiastically dwelt so much on issues relating to human condition, history and political landscape of the cultural milieu in which those literary works are set. Moreover, the social commitment of the contemporary African artists (writers) cannot be overstressed. This synchronises with Achebe's (1975) position that artists live and move and have their being in society, and create their works for the good of the society. Breyten Breytenbach (2007:166) describes a writer and sums up his social responsibilities in the following words:

...he is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society...he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people. In

the poor and colonised countries (like Nigeria) the writer plays a more visible role: faced with acute social and economic iniquities he is called upon to articulate the dreams and the demands of his people...And from this flows the impossibility of the writer ever fitting in completely with any orthodoxy. Sooner or later he is going to be in discord with the politicians.

Therefore, it is not possible for a responsible writer not to write in the interest of the cultural milieu. In the opinion of Terry Eagleton (1977), a writer does not need to foist his own political views on his work because, if he reveals the real and potential forces *objectively* at work in a situation, he is already in that sense partisan. Partisanship is inherent in reality itself; it emerges in a method of treating social reality rather than in a subjective attitude towards it. In other words, writers should objectively present issues as they relate to society without being biased.

Literature is usually committed to the socio-political incidents in the polity. This goes in line with the atavistic definition of literature as the mirror of the society; thus, literature is ontologically, in service of the human society as it portrays all forms of happenings. One of the contemporary issues facing humanity is that of the plight of pensioners or retirees.

Retirement is an event everybody would experience after working for a specified period of time. Most prospective retirees dread the phenomenon, perhaps due to erroneous beliefs attached to it. Retirement in the past had been associated with loss of finance, self-esteem, social security, emotional instability and old age related diseases. Pensioners complain of corruption associated with different pension schemes in Nigeria. The plights of the pensioners include quit notice from landlords, selfish governance, non-detailed mechanism in the management of funds, pension scams and arbitrary pilfering of pension funds. For instance, the probe on the military pension scheme by the Nigeria's National Assembly indicated that the sum of N156 billion could not be accounted for (Omoni, 2013).

The concept of pension is viewed from different angles by various scholars. Munnichs (1980) refers to it as the sum of money one receives after concluding one's working career. He sees pension as an aftermath of retirement which he defines as a withdrawal from the workforce that is socially sanctioned through the provision of public pension. This relates to the Latin word "pensio", meaning refunds of money one is entitled to, considering the work done. Haver and Siegal (1986) explain the term as a twentieth century phenomenon that has accompanied the process of industrialisation in most developed societies characterised by declining industrial employment and increasing white collar service sectors.

In the opinion of Friedman and Havighurst (1986), retirement accompanied by good pension is no longer perceived as radical transformation but as the end of the instrumental part of one's existence in favour of an extension of the expressive part which is the leisure time.

**Painful Experience of Pensioners in Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel*  
and Adimora-Ezeigbo' *Trafficked***

Gabriel García Márquez is a Colombian author of more than fifteen highly acclaimed books. He is a Nobel laureate and a major proponent and master of magical realism in the world literature. As a matter of fact, he remains one of the most widely read and critically acclaimed contemporary authors in the world today. His best-known work is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. When *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published, it shook apart the literary scene in Latin America, and soon its impact reverberated around the world. His other works include *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, and *Love in the Time of Cholera*, as well as his memoir *Living to Tell the Tale*. García Márquez, who has become a symbol of contemporary Latin American literature, has had a great impact on the state of literature in both Latin America and abroad, influencing writers around the world. As a socially committed writer, Márquez often predicates his works on the socio-political happenings within his milieu. Thus, even though he is a fiction writer, his works are not without elements of fact or verisimilitude. In the novel under discourse, though it was written about six decades ago, what the author depicts is down-to-earth when one relates it to human experience in contemporary society. *No One Writes to the Colonel* is a story of an impoverished and retired Colonel, a veteran who continues to wait for his pension that has been promised to him for some fifteen years. The novel is set in Columbia at a time where Martial law prevailed. The Colonel has served his country but he has got nothing as his reward; rather, he lives in a state of despair.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, on the other hand, is one of Nigeria's most illustrious writers. Her first work of fiction for young readers, *The Buried Treasure*, was published by Heinemann of UK in 1992. Since then, she has been making significant and incomparable contribution to literature by writing novels, short stories, and children's books. She was declared one of the two winners in the NLNG Prize for Literature for her children's novel *My Cousin Sammy* in 2007. Another novel, *House of Symbols*, won four medals. Two of her books were shortlisted for the ANA Prize this year, one of which (*Heart Songs*) won the Cadbury Prize for Poetry. On top of all that, she is one of the most visible gender and feminist writers, theorists and critics in Nigeria today.

Written at different times and from different polities, the two texts relay the same story of pains, hopelessness, spacelessness, waiting, frustration, despair and suffering. Whereas the nameless Colonel in Marquez' narrative is the main character in the text, Adimora-Ezeigbo's main character is Nneoma. However, this study is not about Nneoma but about her father, Ogukwe. Nneoma is a victim of human trafficking who is trapped due to unfavourable living condition in her milieu. Thus, in her attempt to escape the harsh reality, she falls into a more deadly gulf. Meanwhile, her father's financial challenge is one of the many factors that push her out. Hence, Nneoma's experience is closely linked with her father's (Ogukwe's).

In Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, Ojukwe is a pensioner who hopelessly waits for his pension. Ojukwe is supposed to be the breadwinner, unfortunately, he cannot help the situation. All these make Nneoma opt to travelling out in order to escape the pangs of penury. Ojukwe hears a strange rumour that the Federal Government is going to pay outstanding gratuities to retirees. The source informs him that those that have waited for up to five years would be attended to first. This seems to be the fulfilment of his age-long dream. However, Ojukwe's daughter, Mma, expresses pessimism saying that:

This is cheerful news. But let's not rejoice until the money is in your hands. I don't trust our government. Look at the teachers' strike, nothing has been done about it. We have forgotten very thing we learned in school. No one knows if we will ever go back (110).

This is nothing but a down-to-earth picture of Nigeria. Nigerians have been disillusioned as their hope in the government seems to be unfulfillable. From Mmba's speech, it could be deduced that the falling standard of education is another factor responsible for the fuelling of human trafficking and indiscriminate immigration of Nigerians. Akanle (2009) maintains that a lot of Nigerians that immigrate into the United Kingdom are the educated, young and ambitious who consider their chances of furthering at home irrelevant and needless since they do not twist the educational system is known across Nigeria to be of standard among the best in the world.

The financial quandary of Ojukwe's family is a serious one. Ojukwe is not paid his retirement gratuity and his pension. He has to travel to Enugu always, though fruitlessly to try to get his money. Unfortunately, he descends into depression as he takes solace in alcohol. When Ofomata proposes to Nneoma, it seems like good news to the family. Ojukwe appeals to his daughter not to turn down his proposition saying: "My little mother, think of what this will mean to us, land-starved as we are in this family! I can build a house on the land" (71). Thus, Nneoma's positive response would be a cushion to the family's financial tension. The foregoing is a clear indication of what happens to disillusioned pensioners all over the world. Perhaps the only means to an end for Ojukwe is the marriage of her daughter with Ofomata, who comes from a well-to-do family. Thus, in order to get out of his socio-economic entanglement, he opts for "commodifying" her daughter by marrying her off to her rich family. Appealing to Nneoma, Ojukwe says "my little mother, think of what this will mean to us, land-starved as we are in this family".... "I can build a house on the land" (71).

Moreover, the Colonel's condition becomes an allegorical representation of the status of man in postcolonial society. The Colonel lives in continued hope while he awaits his pension. Although the Colonel is hopeful, when his condition is critically viewed, he becomes helpless and hopeless. The Colonel's expectation is neither met nor fulfilled. The narrator vividly depicts the high level of the Colonel's poverty. For instance, he has to scrape the inside of the coffee can to get some coffee. The narrative is graphically presented in such a way that one feels for the victim-protagonist, who is

a veteran Colonel who has worked all his life and is now expecting a reward from the authority at the “close of time”. The Colonel is in his mid seventies and he and his wife are down to their very last money, selling off family heirlooms to eat. They are waiting for his pension to begin, and in-between this wait, they must confront hunger both physically and metaphorically, a wait in anticipation of letter which will announce the commencement of the Colonel’s pension that will invariably bring them the income for life to which he is entitled (Akujobi, 2009).

He has a bedridden wife who suffers from asthma. However, despite his poor and pathetic state, he cares for his wife. He lies to his wife that he has taken his own coffee whereas he gives everything to her. Thus, it is observed that though the Colonel is financially incapacitated, he is responsible. However, he would have been more responsible if not irresponsible and non-responsive government that is blind to the plight and deaf to the cry of the pensioners.

Contrary to the normal practice when parents leave inheritance for their children, it is Augustin, Colonel’s deceased son that leaves an inheritance for the parents. As a matter of fact, the Colonel here is a representative of the oppressed retirees in the world. Pensioners across the globe are subjected to abandonment by the government which they have served all through their life time. In other words, these aged and vulnerable pensioners are deserted by the government. Thus, government’s refusal to cater for the physical and emotional needs of the retirees further aggravates their ageing pains (Patience Edirin Ukiri Mudiare, 2013). He prepares to go out to check his mail on Friday. He wears his shoes that “are already to throw out” (11), whereas his wife asks him to wear the patent-leather shoes. This portrays the level of his lack.

Ordinarily, an employee should be able to build a house while at service. However, most workers’ take-home cannot take them home. Although some workers often spend recklessly, there are many who desire having a house of their own but for their little pay. In the case of Ogukwe, he is unable to build a house throughout the course of his service though his retirement is premature. Shelter is one of the basic needs of man. It is not a luxury but a necessity of life. Lack of shelter here metaphorises insecurity as the pensioners are usually roofless and routeless. Thus, they are exposed to all forms of abuse in the community. Ogukwe has quarrel with his brother, Ezeozo Eke, who is supposed to ensure that a place is ready for him and his family to live in his mother’s quarters. Ogukwe’s wife laments the narrowness and inconvenience of the hut where they to put their heads: “Now we’re having to move into tiny hut on a little patch of land. It’s not even big enough for two people” (*Trafficked*, 69).

Furthermore, the living room where Marquez’ Colonel lives together with his asthmatic wife is described as being “too narrow for an asthmatic’s breathing” (*No One*, 4). This emphasises the spacelessness and narrowness of life. The only source of hope for the Colonel and his dying wife appears to be the fighting cock which he treats like a child. According to him, “We’re rotting alive” (6). The major advantage of the public sector over the private sector is that public sector employees often enjoy

greater security of tenure and job security with a guaranteed entitlement to both a pension and gratuity. In contrast to the public sector, private sector employers tend to have the right to hire and fire at will, with or without providing any explicit reasons (Olanrewaju Emmanuel Ajiboye, 2011). It is, however, disheartening to state that the kind of hope that public workers have is more or less a mirage as their working and living conditions both before and after retirement are not enviable.

Furthermore, Marquez emphasises abject poverty which characterises the life of the pensioners as represented by the Colonel. According to the narrator,

Because of his wife's asthma, his white suit was not pressed. So he had to wear the old black suit which since his marriage he used only on special occasions. It took some effort to find it in the bottom of the trunk, wrapped in newspapers and protected against moths with little balls of naphthalene (*No One* 5).

This shows that the man is in lack. He has to take care of his wedding suit like baby since there is no alternative. In other words, since the present condition does not give him joy, he relies on his past. For most pensioners, the only joy they can share is in the past when they were still in service.

Ideally, retirement ought to be a time to indulge in activities or extended holidays that a life time of work could never manage, not a time to contemplate returning to work. However, in underdeveloped and developing countries today, retirement poses serious financial challenges that would require pensioners to come out of retirement almost immediately. This is not unconnected with some factors. Pension payments (gratuity and lump sum) are irregular and sometimes months and even years pass by before payments are made. In the same vein, pensioners are still breadwinners and, therefore, pension incomes are spent on the family including the extended families. The two victim-characters in the texts (Colonel and Ogukwe) endlessly wait for their gratuity which they are never granted. Unlike the Colonel who only has his dying wife to look after, Ogukwe has other many mouths to feed including children and wife. It is this financial incapability that pushes Nneoma, Ogukwe's daughter out to search for a greener pasture abroad where she is trapped into prostitution.

In order to solve their plights during retirement, pensioners take their own destiny in their hands. According to Mohammad Mahdi Kashani Lotf-Abadi (2011), the Colonel experiences his freedom to choose and gain subjectivity when he tries to make a decision. The Colonel seems to be stocked in a dilemma: on the one hand, he does not want to bid farewell to the glorious past and what he had done in the civil war, and on the other, he does not prefer to do something else rather than just waiting for receiving a letter containing his pension. When he meets the lawyer, he murmurs: "well, I've decided to take action." (*No One* 24). Yet, the decision of the Colonel in doing an action is again seems to relate to the background of his beliefs: waiting. When the lawyer asks about his decision, the Colonel replies: "to change lawyers" (*No One* 24). It shows how much the Colonel feels optimistic toward the

government that after passing fifteen years waiting still hangs on the bureaucratic solutions. The lawyer tries to confirm him that what he is going to do “will take centuries” (*No One* 27). However, the Colonel decides to choose waiting, so he says: “it doesn’t matter. If you wait for the big things, you can wait for little ones” (*No One* 27).

The Colonel finds it difficult to take off his mind from his past. He tries to recount when he is put on the rolls: August 12, 1949. Out of frustration, the Colonel voices out his repressed emotion: “This is not charity”, he said. “It’s not a question of doing us a favour. We broke our backs to save the Republic.” (24) What Marquez depicts here is high level of insensitivity to the plight of aged pensioners and act of ingratitude as expressed by the lawyer who says “human ingratitude knows no limits” (24). As a result of government refusal to pay retirees’ gratuity, many of have very little choice other than returning to some form of work usually in the informal sector where they engage in after-retirement business activity (e.g. trading and agribusiness) in order to provide for their family (Ezi Beedie, 2014). While many of his colleagues are not fortunate to be alive as they many die during war, the Colonel who seems to be the remnant is not in any way better off considering his poor living condition.

While carrying out the postmortem analysis of the old pension scheme in Nigeria for historical archival documentation (1979-2000), Stephen Ocheni, Moses Atakpa and Basil C. Nwankwo (2013) maintain that the purpose of a pension scheme is to provide the employees of an organisation with a means of securing, on retirement, a standard of living reasonably consistent with that they enjoyed while in service. In effect, it is the totality of plans, procedures and legal processes of securing and setting aside of funds to meet the social obligation of care which employers owe their employees on retirement or in case of death. A good scheme serves as an incentive to new employees and helps to hold back experienced staff. It is, therefore, the responsibility of a good employer to articulate and design a good pension plan that will motivate staff.

One of the flimsy excuses often given for the non-payment of pensioners’ entitlements is change in leadership. According to the lawyer, “But the officials have changed many times in the last fifteen years.”... “Just think about it; there have been seven Presidents, and each President changed his Cabinet at least ten times, and each Minister changed his staff at least a hundred times.” (26). The foregoing is a realistic portrayal of political instability in many nations. Thus, it is usually cited as the reason for not paying pensioners what belongs to them. A government that inherits assets should not find it difficult to accept debts or liabilities.

It is a fact that many retirees today live on credit. This has reduced them to mere object of humiliation in their neighbourhood:

He had to grit his teeth many times to ask for credit in the neighbourhood stores, “It’s just until next week,” he would say, without being sure himself that it was true. “It’s a little money which should have arrived last Friday.” (29)

The narrative presents the Colonel as a hopeless and helpless who continues to hope and wait for a better tomorrow that is never in sight. Waiting is portrayed as an important characteristic of human condition in that people always wait for one thing or the other and so life itself is simply made of waiting suspended between eternity. In waiting, what is known as meaning is subverted and one is left with nothing but hope that one day things will get better very much like the Colonel who, in spite of his age sees the need to wait and hope but the awfulness of this situation is a symbol of the human existential predicament (Akujobi, 2001). His indescribable financial quagmire is responsible for his poor mien as the wife describes him: "You're nothing but skin and bones" (29). Ajiboye (2011) posits that the experience of people has been long queue of pensioners waiting for their pension or demonstration lack of payment of such. The conditions of living of older people who worked in informal sectors of the economy are even more precarious when compared with their counterparts who worked in the formal sector. This is because they have the opportunity of receiving pension at the end of their retirement from active service. Those who worked in the informal sector have no access to pension, and hence, their livelihood depends on the remittance from the adult children and extended family network. This further compounds their condition.

The plight of the aged pensioners who have spent their active years serving their fatherland should not only be worrisome, it should also be unacceptable. As a matter of fact, when pensioners are allowed to suffer it shows lack of regard for the committed senior citizens and insensitiveness to the wellbeing of this set of people.

The characters in Marquez' narrative bear no real name except for Augustin, the Colonel's son who is deceased. The idea of namelessness makes the characters stand as a representative figure for the men in the society. On the other hand, the namelessness could also be seen in terms of the insignificance of the disadvantaged people. The Colonel and his wife have been orphaned by their son who is killed for political reasons. Here, the natural order of life becomes subverted as the son who symbolises the family's posterity is no more. This becomes a threat to the continuity of the Colonel's generation as that spells his extinction.

The Colonel and his wife are sickly. The Colonel has a feeling that 'fungus and poisonous lilies were taking root in his gut' (3), while his wife is asthmatic. The couple suffers from ill-health as they are not adequately taken care of. The Colonel wife says, 'we are rotting alive, everything's that way' (6). The Colonel spends several sleepless nights as he is being tormented by the whistling of the asthmatic woman's lungs. They have no money to get drugs. The Colonel's wife puts stone in the pot to boil so that their neighbours would not know they are not putting their pot to use, she also makes clothing from patches or pieces of cloths of different colours, while the roof of the house that they live in leaks. In short, they lack good basic amenities, in terms of food, clothing and shelter. This depicts their deplorable condition especially, in a postcolonial society, which is seen in terms of their disillusionment.



All of the Colonel's comrades have died while waiting for their mail. They have all broken their back to save their country but get nothing as the reward for their labour. Every Friday, the Colonel hopes that he receives a letter, but all the while, he returns home with empty hands. Concerning his war pension, it takes eight years to prove his claim and another six years for his name to be included on the rolls, however, that was the last letter he receives.

Marquez portrays how the government has contributed to man's deprivation such that his situation is worsened. The Colonel is affected by the political instability that exists in his society as reflected in the governmental policies and systems such that the Colonel's war pension becomes affected because his document seems unnoticeable and unattended to by the government officials that are being changed several times.

The sustenance of the Colonel's family appears to be hinged on the rooster that the Colonel prefers to feed with the remaining food in the house, because the rooster brings in money for them through gambling as it is being engaged in a cockfight. However, the providence from the rooster would soon vanish as it would soon be sold off. The rooster also stands as a reminder of the Colonel's dead son since the rooster belongs to the son, 'their son who was shot down nine months before at the cockfights for distributing clandestine literature'. (11)

The image of death looms in the narrative. At the beginning of the narration, the Colonel is seen preparing to attend a funeral of a town musician whose death is natural and uncommon, since over the years, many has died because of disease, hunger, war and other societal inflicted mishaps. When the Colonel meets the postmaster, he tells him that he has come for his letter which is sure, but the postmaster tells him that death is the only sure thing.

*No One Writes to the Colonel* and *Trafficked* become universal narratives with their preoccupation about what seems common to man. The Colonel and Ojukwe never get what they are promised at the end of their services while they endlessly wait and hopelessly hopeful. The narratives are a kind of national allegory as they narrate realistic situations whereby some pensioners die while waiting to get their pension on a long queue under the scorching sun.

### Conclusion

The marriage between literature and society cannot be divorced as writers make use of their works to diagnose the various ailments confronting humanity. In other words, there is close link between the context and the text. Though writers rely on their imagination, their imagination alone cannot do much without 'images' from society. This paper has, therefore, examined the picture of society as depicted in the selected novels. The novelists employ their literary prowess to carry out a surgico-literary operation on the sickly human society where pains, frustration, despair, hopelessness, lack, sickness, leadership irresponsibility and non-responsiveness, moral decadence, poverty, and spacelessness have become the characteristic features. Pensioners' plight

is not a new phenomenon in the world. Marquez' novel was published in the twentieth century, while Adimora-Ezeigbo's was published in the twenty-first century. This shows that writers have been critiquing the unpalatable experiences of aged and dying pensioners who have no one to cushion their pains. All government pension scheme reforms perpetually deform pensioners as a result of unwholesome practices, such as bribery and corruption, embezzlement, misappropriation, and wickedness. Marquez' Colonel and Adimora-Ezeigbo's Ogukwe are, therefore, representatives of suffering, oppressed and dying pensioners across the globe. Hence, it is the collective responsibility of everyone to ensure that life is *liveable* for pensioners who have sincerely served their fatherland. Pains should not be gain of their service to their nations.

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