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## “Migrant Women Are Always Added”: In Conversation with Ebum Joseph Akpoveta

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**Abstract.** Ebum Joseph Akpoveta was born in Nigeria in 1970. She is originally from Okpe in the State of Edo but she was later raised in Benin City. Her primary degree is in Microbiology from the University of Benin in Nigeria. Her professional career started in the State of Lagos and she was the Administrative Secretary for the Nigerian Britain Association before she moved to Ireland back in 2002. Since her arrival in Ireland, Ebum Joseph Akpoveta has been engaged in various activities and has been a prolific and pro-active member of the Nigerian community in her new home country. While in Ireland she has also furthered her academic instruction and has been a student of various postgraduate programmes. She obtained a Master’s degree in Education, Adult Guidance and Counselling from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She was recently awarded a Ph.D. by the UCD School of Social Justice in Equality Studies, one of her many passions apart from literature and writing. Ebum Joseph Akpoveta is also an equality activist, a career coach and a motivational speaker. She is an IACP-accredited counsellor and has great experience working with immigrants in Ireland. With this main cause in mind she founded *The Unforgettable Women’s Network – TUWN* which advocates for equality between men and women. She is a founding member of the African Women Writers Ireland, a Member of RTÉ Audience Council, and a columnist for the *African Voice* Newspaper.

Ebum Joseph Akpoveta’s first book, *Becoming Unforgettable. Uncovering the Essence of the Woman* (2012), had the format of a counselling, self-help volume for women who need to articulate their experiences and cope with different plights. Her debut into fiction was with the harrowing novel *Trapped: Prison without Walls* (2013); here she embarks on the narration of difficult ordeals by immigrant African women in their new “host” country, Ireland. With this novel, Ebum Joseph Akpoveta interrogates the manner by which literary discourses in post Celtic Tiger Ireland challenge, elide or accommodate issues of globalization, immigration, and the notion of multiculturalism. With her fiction, Ebum Joseph Akpoveta questions much-used celebratory accounts of Irish multiculturalism, at least in media and political discourses, as integrationist and inclusive of the “Other”, and in particular, the female Other.

Ebum Joseph Akpoveta lives in Dublin with her beloved family. I would like to thank her for her patience and kindness in collaborating to expand and finalise the present written version of her interview through e-mail.

**Key Words.** Immigrant Women, Post-Celtic Tiger, Gender-Based Violence, Multiculturalism, Integration, New Irish

**Resumen.** Eburn Joseph Akpoveta nació en Nigeria en 1970. Es natal de Okpe, en el estado de Edo, pero recibió su educación en Ciudad de Benín. Sus estudios de grado son en Microbiología por la Universidad de Benín en Nigeria. Comenzó su carrera profesional en el Estado de Lagos como Secretaria Administrativa en la asociación Británico-Nigeriana antes de emigrar a Irlanda en 2002. Desde su llegada a Irlanda, Eburn Joseph Akpoveta ha estado involucrada en diversas actividades y ha sido miembro activo de la comunidad nigeriana en su nuevo país de acogida. En Irlanda ha proseguido su formación académica en diversos estudios de postgrado. Tras sus estudios de máster en la Universidad Nacional de Irlanda en Maynooth, ha finalizado en la Facultad de Justicia Social de la UCD sus estudios de doctorado en justicia igualitaria, otra de sus muchas pasiones además de la literatura y la escritura. Mujer de muchos talentos es, además, activista en la igualdad, una “coach” profesional y guía motivacional. Es consejera acreditada de la IACP y tiene una amplia experiencia trabajando con inmigrantes en Irlanda. Además fundó la TUWN (*The Unforgettable Women’s Network*) que aboga por la igualdad de las mujeres. Es además miembro fundador de la Asociación Irlandesa de Escritoras Africanas, miembro del Consejo de la Audiencia de RTÉ y columnista del periódico *African Voice*.

Su primer libro fue *Becoming Unforgettable. Uncovering the Essence of the Woman* (2012) y se trataba de un libro de autoayuda para mujeres que necesitaban tener voz dentro de sus distintas situaciones problemáticas. Su debut en la ficción fue *Trapped: Prison without Walls* (2013), en el que trata de la difícil situación de las mujeres inmigrantes africanas que llegan a su nuevo país de acogida, Irlanda. Con esta su primera novela, Eburn Joseph Akpoveta interroga cómo el discurso literario post Tigre Celta abarca temas como la globalización, la inmigración y el multiculturalismo desde la perspectiva de las mujeres inmigrantes. Eburn Joseph Akpoveta pone en cuestión muchos de los relatos que se han acercado al multiculturalismo irlandés como algo positivo, integrador e inclusivo del “otro” en la sociedad; en este caso en particular, el “otro” femenino.

Eburn Joseph Akpoveta vive actualmente en Dublín con su familia. Me gustaría agradecerle su tremenda paciencia y su generosidad al colaborar en la finalización de la presente entrevista en su versión escrita, que se llevó a cabo por correo electrónico en su mayor parte.

**Palabras clave.** Mujeres inmigrantes, post Tigre Celta, violencia de género, multiculturalismo, integración, los nuevos irlandeses

**Asier Altuna-García de Salazar:** You belong to a group of Nigerian immigrant women writers, such as Olutoyin Pamela Akinjobi, Ifedinma Dimbo, Melatu-Uche Okorie, who are considering the whole process of migration to Europe, especially to Ireland. Adaptation to a new country and inclusion in the “host” community are central concerns for many migrants and these writers explore the lived experiences of immigrant African women in particular. After more than two decades of migration to Ireland since the start of the Celtic Tiger back in the 1990s and its collapse, would you say that the concept of the “Irish woman” has started to incorporate the realities of these immigrant women, and especially African women? What aspects of this inclusion are still pending? How difficult or easy do you find it to narrate such processes in your fiction?

Ebun Joseph Akpoveta: From where we are now in Ireland, in the Ireland of the twenty-first century after the boom of the Celtic Tiger and its later collapse, I don't think when Ireland mentions women that this statement includes migrant women at all. Unfortunately, when one looks at the different issues that concern women, migrant women are not part of the mainstream discourse. Yes, of course, if the issue were migration, then migrant women are added or, should I say, they are the quintessential subjects of this discourse. Migrant women are always added in, not part of... If you understand what I mean. And, accordingly, if these women continue to be added on as an afterthought, then the solutions to their issues will always be secondary.

We are dealing here with a wide range of harrowing issues from limited access to labour participation, domestic violence and how migrant women, who come from patriarchal societies in their countries of origin, are still subjugated even in the midst of so much supposed equality. One has to address here the lack of access to support for women of migrant descent who cannot be supported by their families like aunties, sisters, parents and so forth. All this means that school-runs or taking kids to extracurricular activities are problems that they experience on a particularly acute level. Even when all women are affected by childcare issues, women of migrant background have it worse. Women from outside the EU cannot just invite their mums or sisters to help them due to visa issues; thus, the functioning of family life is even more problematic. Similarly, acute issues are raised when it comes to women's health... are they – maternity care and health – issues that take into consideration migrant women? In the last few years in Ireland, most of the African women I know have issues with high blood pressure and fibroids. Do they come up on women's agenda? No they don't. In Ireland, migrant women still have to fight for their problems outside the mainstream of women's issues.

**AAG: For many, the much-cited – mainly in media and political discourses – celebratory welcoming of immigrants to Ireland was the norm before the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, as the economy was booming and globalization was at full sway in Ireland. However, all over Europe, and also in Ireland, multiculturalism seems to be in crisis as the plural and integrationist agendas of many countries have not addressed tolerance, equal rights and participation in society fully. In this vein, Bryan Fanning has stated that “the issue of multiculturalism and its discontents cannot be ignored” (Fanning 2007: 243). Your fiction approaches the realities of Nigerian women who suffer not only the contact with the native Irish community in Ireland. Rather, your writing exposes gender inequality within these women's own immigrant Nigerian community in Ireland. Does your fiction tackle not only contact between immigrant and native communities in Ireland but, rather, how real recognition and integration are still at stake in Ireland after the Celtic Tiger?**

EJA: I hope that message came across clearly in my novel *Trapped: Prison without Walls*, i.e. that real recognition and integration are still at stake in Ireland. My research for my doctorate showed that what we have in Ireland is closer to assimilation than integration where to be is to be like. In other words, for people of migrant descent to actually have recognition and respect – which I call hidden resources –, they have to take on as much of the outward signs of Irish ethnicity as possible. They also have to mute their mutable traits; for example, their language in public spaces, to dress in European ways... if they do not, they are automatically inferiorised. Non-EU migrants have to get new qualifications from Ireland if they want to have access to paid employment. So contact is still very difficult for many migrants. Unfortunately, the everyday micro-aggressions in workplaces are all well documented. One of

my interviewees for my doctorate mentioned how a customer told her that he didn't want to be served by a monkey. How does a person get over that? She said she was so shaken with anger. She was in tears when she recounted her story to me, even when this very incident had happened to her a number of years ago. This lady is a master's degree holder, underemployed and working as an over-the-counter customer service agent.

Integration does not manifest itself just in organizing events to share food, music and dance of different cultures. It is in their shared access to resources, in being treated fairly, equally and with respect that should be taken seriously.

**AGG: How have the integrationist and pluralist agendas in Ireland featured in your writing? How do you represent the way in which Irish society is being transformed because of immigration?**

EJA: I think that issue is totally underrepresented. What is really mentioned is only the negative ways in which the Irish society is being transformed by migration. Ireland now has a reputation of being a multicultural society (even if that is still questionable). This fact definitely affects our access to some of the international business and corporations we are attracting as a nation. If we were still the monocultural society that we were years ago, our situation would have been worse today. Young people, who are coming home now, are quite different from their parents who had never spoken to another person from a different culture; so yes the fear of difference is reduced or reducing among the younger generations. They are slightly better prepared for life and work as most parts of the world are very diverse. This story also needs to be told, and, most certainly, in the case of Ireland.

**AGG: According to recent critiques of migration and multiculturalism by literary critics (such as Jason King or Mary Pierse), new immigrant voices are emerging in Irish literature; however, not much has been written about the content of this work or how it can be incorporated into the corpus of Irish literature. Do you agree and how would you position your fiction to date?**

EJA: To my mind, one of the major challenges which ties to your first question is that migrants' issues and problems are not seen as mainstream issues at all in Ireland. So unless our stories fit the stereotypical views that portray people of migrant descent as needy, learning English, poor, uneducated or uncouth, it is an uphill task to get our work recognized.

I know I authored a novel, but I am also a reader, I have read a number of acclaimed authors and I think my work is great. Most of the feedback I got was that my writing was compelling and held their attention. We bring a different perspective to the literary field in Ireland and our voices have to be listened to too.

**AAG: Your two works, *Becoming Unforgettable. Uncovering the Essence of the Woman* (2012) and *Trapped: Prison without Walls* (2013) are very different in theme, style and development, but they both have women as a central point, and African women, in the case of your second work. The former is more a counselling, self-help volume that encourages women to voice and cope with a myriad of situations and ordeals. The second one deals with the life of Orla Peters, a Nigerian mother and wife, who has migrated to Ireland. As the book cover of *Becoming Unforgettable* states "all over the world, the woman's story is the same"; but, what prompted you to approach Orla's story from an Irish setting and perspective?**

EJA: I was tired of the stories that were coming to me every day as, sadly enough, the cases of domestic violence in migrant families in Ireland are becoming more rampant. Some immigrant women were being killed within their own homes and I could just hear the powerlessness many women were feeling in terms of receiving real help. I wanted to do something about it the way I could, counselling; participating in fora of discussion, being active and, of course, writing. First of all, my intention was to shock people into thinking about what could happen if they don't break away from the patriarchal belief system that being a "good woman" meant staying in a relationship no matter what. For me, that rather ride or die mentality that had been socialized into many women had to be shaken and changed. Besides, I also wanted these immigrant women to begin talking openly about their harrowing issues and challenges within their own communities, but, of course, also in Ireland. Unfortunately, there was too much secrecy. If these women feel they are the only ones going through something, then they are even more reluctant to voice it out. It was my two cents.

Also, Ireland for me is my home now and so I needed and wanted to write from that new perspective too. I think we, migrants, are at a unique point of being on the liminal margins of two cultures – home and host – as the first generation of migrants to Ireland has already established itself somehow (although one could argue that this is not technically true as migration into Ireland is older than we actually reckon it to be – although not on a mass scale as it has occurred in the last two decades and a half). Indeed, many migrant people are still grappling with managing these two cultures in their new home: Ireland.

**AAG: In the end, what you are also addressing is the overall liberation of women worldwide. To your knowledge, how does this liberation differ from country to country? How do you envisage the liberation of women in your fiction?**

EJA: I see the liberation of women strongly linked to the revaluing of the female person as an equal person: not as a helper, not as an appendage or even as a womb to carry babies, but as a person in her own right. I strongly believe that the chores and tasks that women do should be valued. So, practical dimensions such as women's work in the home and taking care of the family unit should be fully recognized and accepted as work experience when seeking employment. Overall, the way women are both portrayed and raised has to be changed totally so as to show what they can do and to allow them to really be what they want to be. More importantly, that mindset of dependency can and should be addressed. Women didn't just decide on it, society teaches women to be that way. It rewards women who are merely dependent. When women are presented as the "helpless... needy, I can't think for myself" type, society rewards that. When women appear strong, confident, they are called all kinds of names like bossy, controlling, un-submissive.

Of course, this varies from country to country. But, no nation is free from gender inequality. For instance, many white Irish women who read my book will remember when Ireland was like that – when rape within marriage could not be reported or prosecuted.

**AAG: Your latest novel, *Trapped: Prison without Walls* (2013), tackles marginalization, gender-based violence and family dysfunction in a Nigerian family that is eventually reunited in Dublin. Although in the novel you refer to the "exotic" encounter between migrant and native in some situations, you also want to disregard the false assumption that all immigrants are asylum seekers or live on refugee aid. Is there a fictional reason for that in your novel? What are you trying to say about these two communities in contact, the "host" Irish and the "guest" Nigerian community in Ireland?**

EJA: Generally speaking, the Nigerian community in Ireland has been cast into the damaging and incorrect stereotype of asylum seekers and spongers on social welfare. They are all branded with what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has called “the single story”. Interestingly enough, as far back as the early 80s, Nigerians were first here as medical students. I have two friends today who were here in secondary school before their parents took them back to Nigeria to complete their education. As we all know, Nigerians are the biggest African community in Ireland. As a result of all this, we have mixed families now and they make massive contributions in the community and they cannot be utterly ignored nor stereotyped as asylum seekers only. When we look through Irish history, the Irish also emigrated in large numbers and were stereotyped until they became acceptable whites. For that reason it is not understandable why issues of exoticism and racism appear.

**AAG: The very title of your novel, *Trapped: Prison without Walls*, plays with the idea of a harrowing situation and ordeal that your protagonist, Nigerian Orla, has to suffer in a country that presents “no walls” to equality. Was that your intention? Were you depicting and showing an “egalitarian” future in Ireland for all those women who could be in the same situation as Orla?**

EJA: Very true: that and a bit more. I really wanted my readers to understand or to see into the “invisible” ropes that keep many women longer than we can possibly understand in abusive relationships. And this can be extended to all women, not only immigrant women in Ireland. Many outside of those spaces don’t understand how a woman can stay with someone she’s scared of or a person who hits and abuses her. I really wanted society in general to see that we are all complicit in the way we socialise women differently. Indeed, from the church to the social welfare officers, from parents who force their daughters to keep the family name by not separating, women still suffer from a “no clear response” to their plight from society at large.

With this first novel I also wanted women in that harrowing situation to know and feel that someone understands them and that we, as a society, don’t blame them. More than that, with my fiction I wanted to tell all these women that there is a way out: that it doesn’t have to be the end at all. So yes, I was painting an egalitarian future in Ireland for any woman in such a situation like Orla’s one, about her options, how hard it might be, but that there are resources available in Ireland (both within their communities and outside) for them so they can eventually obtain freedom.

**AAG: The title of your novel also suggests the way in which an integrationist and multicultural Ireland is in crisis. Both “host” and “guest” communities are not being transformed nor provide plausible solutions to harrowing issues once the intercultural encounter has taken place. What is still missing for this to happen? How does fiction like yours help in the implementation of “equality policies” that could transform both “host” and “guest”?**

EJA: Someone described my book *Trapped: Prison without Walls* as a satire, as I denounce certain vices and wrongdoings of society. I think that materials like my novel have the potential to tell stories people are not very open to hearing or writing about. I love Critical Race Methodology (CRT) counter-storytelling and Derrick Bell also employed a successful combination of fact and fiction to address the issue of racism in the U.S. directly. In this vein, my fiction can be transformative and draw attention to the practical dimensions that actually need to be addressed to effect real policy changes. I have tried to address all of these issues paying special attention to the realities of migrant African women in Ireland.

**AAG: If I am not mistaken, your novel is the only one that has bluntly addressed the visualization of many harrowing realities within these new ethnic communities in Ireland: family dysfunction, GBV and marginalization within the very same immigrant community in the “host” country. At the end of your novel the female protagonist, Orla, is trapped within all these realities, as the title advances. You expose the way in which Nigerian women carry with them the burden of a patriarchal Nigeria. However, their situation with regard to this issue does not change and gets replicated in a first-world country, Ireland. How does your female protagonist get rid of all these opposing networks – in their home and host countries, and what is your message for immigrant women who might endure similar situations in other countries in the world, not only in Ireland?**

EJA: Orla in the novel at the end of the day realized her situation was a negotiation between these two worlds, or at least she tried. One important way for her was to try and build economic independence for herself and her children in her new “host” country, in Ireland. This is vital to reduce the fear of the “other” in their “host” countries. This realization of her new situation in a new society also helps to build new networks; but, in the end the achievement of changes and the realization of the “new” values of these immigrant women must be solely theirs, and not the ones shaped by society, media, family or religion.

**AAG: Your novel also offers an analysis of some of the situations that exist within ethnic minorities in Ireland and, in your case, within Nigerian immigrant communities. We all agree that diasporic communities are very diverse and complex. Your portrayal of these, however, is sombre and negative. What role do these communities and their networks of peer-nationals play in the lives of immigrants, especially in Ireland, and in the particular case of immigrant women? Do you see that they are transforming some of their traditions or behaviours once they are in a new “host” country?**

EJA: I hope *Trapped* will not be taken as the single story of Nigerian migrants in Ireland or around the world. However, it was a story that needed to be told, for those few women and families on the margins of society... suffering in silence. Of course, migrant networks are hugely beneficial at large. Some days when you suffer some micro-aggressions, just being able to talk to someone who understands is utterly priceless. It really helps you “vent” and get the feeling out of your system. Indeed, all the supports are great, needed and really helpful. This is, particularly, the case of the Nigerian community in Ireland. Among many other initiatives, this community has women’s motivational groups. I, myself, run one of them. These groups also empower migrant women, support them and address their issues. The friendships, childcare support or everyday encouragement to carry on come from all these supportive groups. These networks have their place within the immigrant communities in Ireland and their role should not be underestimated at all. Sometimes, family conflicts are actually resolved with their help. Abusive partners are chastised. My novel, *Trapped*, focused on just one aspect of the Nigerian migrant experience. But, of course, there are other stories, and they still have to be told.

**AAG: In your novel, Orla’s husband, Deji Peters, reminds Orla that as a Nigerian woman she should not forget her “African values”. As a counsellor, pastor and writer yourself, how would you see multiculturalism and integration improving the “values agenda”? Can globalization really implement any kind of values too? Deji seems to imply there are Irish and African values. How do you envisage such “difference” in**

**values as a barrier to integration in Ireland? How does your fiction present such “difference”?**

EJA: Most times, we view integration from the outward person. That is vital as well. However, unless we are integrated within ourselves, all our inner insecurities also play out in our outer world. So, a good place to start is actually looking at how one is integrated within oneself. By this I mean how the different bits of ourselves become integrated. Africans came to Ireland or other European countries with their own values and these are great, of course. As a matter of fact, we have to try not to lose those values. Migrants have also encountered some really good values in their new “host” country. The hard bit is learning which ones to hold on to and which ones to let go. Ultimately, the longer migrants sojourn in their new countries, the many more “bits” from their African values get filed away. It is not a bad thing if we exercise our agency and are an active part of that process... negotiating, hence, which “bits” to hold on to or let go in our new society.

**AAG: I would also like to address at this point how writing by immigrant women in Ireland gets published and is offered a voice. Do you encounter difficulties in getting your work published? Are there any strategies you would like to see from both the “host” country but also from the immigrant writer?**

EJA: Of course, this is again another uphill task... but, I am a fighter and rarely take no for an answer if I really want something. I keep digging till I find a way. I guess that according to the identity changes which I propose in my writing, this happens to many migrants in the Irish labour market, and how they actually negotiate racial stratification. I will be one of those who resist racial stratification – this is what I am researching now and how this shows up in the labour market; the different outcomes and the socioeconomic disparity among migrant groups.

I can use my own story as an example of the difficulty of the experience of migrant writers. I sent out chapters to get published but, it was all negative responses. Then I decided to self-publish, which is what is available to migrant authors..., the next option was to look for opportunities for distribution and book signing in mainstream outlets. I wrote to a good number, but it was more of a catch 22! I had to have a big publicity plan for them to display my books in all the bookshops in Ireland I contacted. Then I thought, okay, try and get on some media programmer that showcases new authors, but none of them were willing. So, it is not for want of trying or not knowing the channels: it is really difficult.

I know self-publishing in Europe is not the most advisable, but if we, as migrant writers, need to get our work out there, we have to start there, and hope to build a reputation that will open those doors for us.

What I would like to see happen is that some sort of allowance should be made for diverse writers and some budget to encourage literary talents like myself and a few others. We do not just want to write about the migration experience only but, about everyday life as we see it. This will not only affect us the authors but it will affect the younger ones who, unfortunately, have no mentors here in this sector in Ireland.

**AAG: In this respect, how influential is the work done by the African Women Writers group in order to promote and make visible the work of African women in Ireland? Are there any other literary groups working towards this goal too?**

EJA: We have undertaken a number of things like book displays, attending fairs, African Day events where books of African women writers are displayed and introduced to the Irish

public. We also provide support for African women writers, encouraging them to write and publish their own work. I think that the main thing here is that we offer encouragement to others and as we have set a precedent, it is much easier for aspiring writers of African descent in Ireland to see themselves producing their own materials. So, in my opinion, that is very important.

**AAG: I would like to ask you a question about your main influences when you write fiction; do you see two, or more, sources of inspiration in your Nigerian background and also in your new Irish home? Who are some of your favourite writers?**

EJA: Chinua Achebe, author of books like *Things Fall Apart*; also, Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian Nobel Prize winner in literature. I also read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Closer this way, I read a lot of Danielle Steel growing up. I am also influenced by the literary styles of Maya Angelou, Alice Malsenior Walker author of *The Color Purple*, or Kathryn Stockett, novelist of *The Help*... Of course I can't forget that I'm a hopeless romantic. My writing is influenced by "silly" love stories from the Mills and Boon series or other such chick flicks, ha, ha...

**AAG: As a final question, could I also ask about your future work? Could you advance some ideas, plots or stories for your readers?**

EJA: hhhmmmmmm.... Okay. So, I have a couple of plots. But the first thing I have to do now is write a monograph from my doctorate on racial stratification and the persistence of inequality. That is keeping most of my time now.

The plot for my next novel is actually tied to that. I had some really evocative stories from the interviews I conducted on how labour market experiences reconstruct human identity... so I am going to fictionalize those real stories, just as I did for *Trapped: Prison without Walls*. The twist is that I am going to get a white person to experience a "black" life... Some of the implicit bias that people think and are too politically correct to mention will be put on display... I am definitely looking forward to that project...

**Thank you so much, Ebum, and all the best with your future academic and literary projects!**

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