

WOMEN'S QUEST FOR FREEDOM, RECOGNITION AND EMPOWERMENT IN NGOZI CHUMA-UDE'S *ECHOES OF A NEW DAWN*

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<http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajmts> vl.13.2.3

Abstract

*This paper centers on women empowerment as an effective strategy to ward off intimidation and subjugation by patriarchy and patriarchal structures that have been put in place by men. Empowerment is expected to improve access to good education, opportunities to acquire skills through training and retraining, access to health and most importantly, the freedom to pursue personal development. It appears that women empowerment is not receiving the critical attention it should from all the stakeholders. This work interrogates women empowerment from the angle of self development and the need for women to take their fate in their hands and strive to dismantle oppressive patriarchal structures in their strive for a better society. Using Ngozi Chuma-Ude's *Echoes Of A New Dawn*, this paper therefore examines the need for women to empower themselves in Igbo communities as a move towards socio-economic liberation. Using content analysis approach of the qualitative research method, this paper critically examines an alternative means of women empowerment which includes education and self assertion amongst others. The paper uses African feminist theories to arrive at the conclusion that African society has not done much to arouse the hopes of women and that the gender biased philosophy and male dominated social structures that still exist in many African communities can be quashed and suppressed by very few radical and strong-willed women. The work finds out that women possess the ability for self assertion and self empowerment. **Keywords:** Empowerment, skill acquisition, women, patriarchy, feminist.*

Introduction

From time immemorial, male and female children have not been exposed to equal treatment in many societies. Male children are usually considered more precious and more welcomed into African families. Right from childhood, female children are trained to be compassionate, humane, humble and affectionate. They are usually guided by their mothers to cook, do house chores and take care of their siblings whether older or younger. They are trained to face the challenges of adulthood as mothers and wives only. With this type of training, women, especially among the Igbo of Nigeria, were trained to do menial jobs, take care of their homes (cleanliness), their husbands and children. Stuck in these menial jobs, they end up not contributing significantly to societal development. They are most of the time considered as not being useful economically, politically and socially. The Igbo people believe that the position of women in Igbo culture was dependence-oriented, hence a common address to married women as 'Oriaku', 'the consumer of wealth'. In the same vein, women all over the world are often seen as weaker vessels who should only be seen and not heard and whose place appear to be in the kitchen. My question is, are women only meant to cook and probably become pieces of furniture that cannot talk but merely used to decorate homes?

The Igbo society is a patriarchal one which believes that women are subordinate to their husbands and are not expected to go contrary to their husband's views. Women in some instances therefore lose their sense of being to their husbands and the society and that is why a woman's husband will die and the community will expect her to kill herself because she lost her husband. She is meant to undergo a lot of torture (punishment) to show the world that she did not kill her husband and failing to do this, she may be branded a 'murderer'. However, when a woman dies, the man becomes as free as air and can even re-marry within the shortest period of time. Religion appears to be one of the platforms for sustaining patriarchy in Africa.

Uchenna Nympha Nkama observes thus:

Religion, more than anything else, greatly influenced indigenous people's understanding of the universe and their relationship with it. Despite the spate of modernism, little has been done to change the religious inclinations of the average Nigerians. The various religious attachments among Nigerians explain the reasons for the tight hold of gender inequality within the Nigerian society. (2)

Women all over the world have actually not been happy about how women are neglected in different societies. They have started crying out to the entire world about their importance through their writings (which before now had been dominated by men) and other avenues of social expressions. Most of the gender based writings have been concerned with women empowerment. Empowerment according to Ozoya et al 'is seen as the development of policies and programmes that will enable girls and women to challenge current norms and change conditions (305). Female writers have over the years questioned so many actions against women, by exposing the oppressive conditions of widows, childless women, career women, unmarried women, married women without male children, early marriage and non-career women. Female African literary writers like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Ngozi Chuma-Ude and a host of others are in the fore front fighting for women's rights through their literary works. Using the text, *Echoes of a New Dawn* by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, the conditions of widows among the Igbo, as well as how women view these conditions are examined in the paper.

Feminism

Feminist theories try to analyze women's subjugation, subjection, rejection and oppression which are offshoots of gender inequality. According to Estelle Freedman in her book, *No Turning Back: A History of Feminism and the Future of Feminism*, European and American women started demanding for women's rights as mother's in the 1880s and the term 'feminism' became popular in the twentieth century. The word 'feminism' is derived from a French word "femme" a word for woman and '-isme' which means social movement or political ideology. Merriam-Webster defines feminism as 'the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. Three waves of feminism according to Berthy Friedan are first wave – 19th Century to 20th Century when women campaigned for their right to vote; Second wave – 1960 and 1970s when women 'fought' for equal rights with men, and Third wave – 1990s, continuation of the second wave of feminism. According to Freedman, the different brands of Feminism include Liberal Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Radical Feminism and Transnational or Global Feminism. Radical feminism is among the second wave of feminism that started in the early 1960s and the founders include Shulamith Firestone, Kathie Sarachild, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Carol Hanisch and Judith Brown. This type of feminism is founded on the grounds that women are oppressed by men because the society is patriarchal. For this group of feminists, feminism indicates and represents liberation and freedom from subjugation and oppression from men. Radical feminism as a framework of Marxist ideology decries exploitation and class distinction and encourages revolution as a weapon of resistance. It is a theory that sees the society as patriarchal where men oppress and suppress women believing that women are not their equals. In fact, women are subjugated and dehumanized. The society supports the patriarchal principles of inequality between males and females. This group of feminists call for radical adjustment, movement and change to evolve society where women will have equal

opportunities and rights with men. To Freedman, there is no turning back for women until they achieve their aim.

The text under study captures a patriarchal society where a professor, faces intimidation, oppression and subjugation from patriarchal strongholds, after the death of her husband. She fights to liberate both herself and the entire women of her community.

The Quest for Freedom in African Literature with Emphasis on Echoes of a New Dawn

Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi writes that Mariama Ba is of the opinion that:

As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to African mother who in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Women have a place within African literature, the place due to them on the basis of their participation - side by side with men –in all phases of the liberation struggle...(36)

Are women actually free? Are they recognized? Are they empowered? What of women's situation in a patriarchal society-what is the fate of women in such organization or community? In the real sense, women's voices started echoing a few decades ago. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's story is about a woman who struggles hard to attain her set goals of being free from the shackles of obnoxious cultural practices. African women writers approach the issues of widowhood in Africa from similar directions. Female writers try to show women agitation concerning so many ugly situations in Africa. Buchi Emecheta in *Second Class Citizen* shows male chauvinism and paints the picture of a submissive wife who is

almost killed by her husband. *The Joys of Motherhood* depicts the faith of a childless woman and a mother that bore only girls in an African society. Nnuego did not bear children in her first marriage but later married Nnaife and has many children both boys and girls. Nnuego almost committed suicide because she lost her four-month old son. This shows the importance of male children in a traditional Igbo setting. Nnaife later marries another wife, Adaku who gives him only daughters. In the end, Nnuego has many children but cannot train them well because she is not educated and so has no good job to make enough money.

Women subjugation in the literary text *Echoes of a New Dawn* by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh shows women that are forced to do so many things against their will because Africa sees women as properties that a man acquires in his house. Women especially widows are traumatized in many instances where they are accused of killing their husbands and so are expected to go through a lot of ordeals and even when they are exonerated and cleared from such accusations, they are still expected to adhere to cultural dictates and become a wife or sex-slave to a relative of the deceased husband. Widows are oppressed and traumatized as the rites inflict serious wounds emotionally, physically and psychologically on them, and they most of the time find it extremely difficult to tell their tales. In the text under study, women are given voices and through their experiences, the writer makes a commentary on the place of women in the African society. Women are so subdued, quietened and overcome that some of them brood for the rest of their lives, while some are affected mentally as they keep talking to themselves and are usually full of regrets. Anita in *Echoes of a New Dawn* will always talk to herself and 'stares vacantly into space'. (186) Anita says about the experience of widows during the burial ceremony and other burial rites.

It was worse than hell, I wonder how and why I really survived it or have I really survived? I go to bed every day with my head full of images of the things I passed through.

I dream of these things, I wake up with them lurking in every corner of my room. I walk about all day with these images dogging my footsteps. I am hollow, just hollow inside. Madam, there is no life in me any longer. What you see is phantom of me. My sisters, better let them put a bullet through your head, for it is a nobler death than to be a living dead with the memories of Ikwa Ajadu rituals haunting you all the days of your life. Do you know that there were times I considered suicide? I thought it better to take my life and end it all for good.(186)

African widows suffer untold experiences, horrible and very bad stories. Although African cultures are diverse, they appear to have many things in common as regards widowhood rites and practices. These obnoxious rites and practices are purportedly done to cleanse the widow and make her pure and clean of whatever defilement, and finally to convince the entire community that she did not kill her husband. If eventually the widow dies during these rites, it is immediately assumed that she killed her husband and it becomes an abomination and disgusting. The villagers will all leave the compound and the immediate family will be made to suffer the untold fate of someone who killed her husband. Ngozi Chuma-Ude's text tells us that immediately a man dies, the wife will not be given the opportunity to react or express herself. She is not expected to talk to anyone, voice out her opinions nor engage in any meaningful conversation. Once your husband takes his last breath, you are expected to announce it to the whole world by crying out loud. You are expected to cry, shout, throw yourself on the ground, roll and show sorrow, how grieved and sad you are for people to see, to the extent that people around will try to hold you to prevent you from harming yourself. This alone will convince people around that you feel bad about your husband's death. Failure to do this will be considered an aberration. In the text under study, Abdul explains to Lucia that women are not allowed to take decisions on matters

concerning them. Men do the thinking for women while they (women) just obey men as directed. Abdul says:

In our culture, a woman is submissive to her husband and to the norms of the society and is under compulsion to bring up her daughters likewise. Women are regarded as sacred vessels of life and nature. That is why they receive serious admonitions when they err. In case of adultery, the woman is summarily condemned to death by stoning because her act is a defilement of nature. (29)

Women are really subdued and intimidated. Such ill treatments have necessitated occasional meetings and conferences where women discuss issues critical to their survival and sustenance. The fourth world Women Conference took place in Beijing from 4th to 15th September, 1995 where women deliberated on why women should not be discriminated upon. According to Ms Mitchell Bachelet in her article 'Women's Rights as Human Rights', she supports the idea that women need equal opportunities and rights as men. She is against any form of subjugation of women. She puts it this way:

We must always say it loud and clear that human rights are universal and gender equality as an expression of those rights is universal as well so women's rights are human rights. No philosophical, political, religious or other reasons can justify the violation of these fundamental ideals and this is the type of globalization that we have to value to the utmost. (16)

In Chuma Udeh's, *Quest for Freedom* Lucia, a professor, the protagonist and a widow, a black American who married an African, Prof. Neziyana could not understand that she was supposed

to cry loudly once she lost the husband, 'she never knew that traditionally, she was supposed to cry and yell louder than every other person. That she was supposed to announce her husband's passing away to the world in a louder voice.'(44) She is not to be allowed to enter the house as she gets to her compound from the hospital. She is expected to go straight to the 'hut of ashes' or mourning hut where she will sit on top of the ashes for fourteen days and is not expected to take her bath for those number of days. (47) A widow is expected not to leave her compound until she tidies up the widowhood rites. She is not allowed to talk to any male child even her own sons, she can interact with the daughters of the Kindred (Umuada). She is also not expected to look a man straight in the face. If she fails or refuses to sit on the ash for fourteen days she will be mandated' to swear, stark naked before the oracle of the village'.(49) She is not allowed to touch anything even her own personal belongings like hand bags etc as whatever she touches is defiled and will be burnt. During this sit down-on-ashes period, Lucia protested. She wanted to liberate herself and other women. She shouted 'enough of all these'(54), Nkechi the sister-in-law and other women around her could not believe their ears as she is not supposed to talk at all in her condition. The palm fronds in her mouth fell off and she threw it at a woman near her, this is an abomination because the palm fronds are not supposed to touch any human being as the palm frond is seen as a symbol of death. Against this background Lucia jumped up to leave the hut but was held back by the women present. Lucia shouted 'I am not staying here a moment longer than this evening. You think I don't have any fight in me but I will....'(58).

Ms Michelle Bachet, the first female president of Chile, approves such act when she writes: 'We must make empowerment a reality... so that women can become the protagonist of their own emancipation' (17) Lucia's empowering of herself started immediately she left the mourning hut. During the cleansing of Mama Adi- the woman she threw palm frond on, Lucia refused to

partake in the sacrifice and the Chief Priest of Aja Ani could not force her to do it instead they had no other option than to summon her nearest relative- Nkechi, to come 'forward and perform the rites'. (92) She is indirectly empowering the widows in their village-Ibonse by insisting that Nkechi her sister in law is the only person to cut her hair. Lucia is again liberated by Nkechi who hired a small boy to secretly place a bucket of very clean water in the make shift bathroom where Lucia is supposed to take her bath immediately after leaving the mourning hut with morgue water. She is so happy that Nkechi liberated her from the wicked fangs of these wicked inhuman and evil local women. In fact, women are their own problems as they are the ones to ensure that every mourning rite must be carried out by the widow. It is obvious that widows in Africa are maltreated, according to Matsobane Manila in her article 'African Traditional Widowhood Rites and their Benefits and/or Detrimental Effects on Widows in a context of African Christianity'. The widow immediately after the burial of her husband in the Phokwane area of Limpopo (Africa) washes her hands and feet traditionally and sprinkles the water on the grave and then shaves her hair. Then the widow's body and traditional wear will be blackened.

During the period of Lucia's ordeal, the 'Umuada' made situations worse by insisting that she must undergo all the traumatic experiences instituted by men that at a point Lucia wondered why these women should be perpetrators of a tradition that negates their own existence'.(42) Going further, Lucia's ordeal did not stop at the mourning hut. As she stays in her house after bathing with the supposed morgue water, the 'Umuadas' ensured that Lucia did things according to their dictates and imposed a fine on her once she did not shout or cry. They requested for the best foods and drinks not minding the economic situation. They ordinarily behaved as if they were above the law.(101). After Lucia's husband's death, Lucia and her children (as the oldest male child is not up to 25 years) will be inherited by the oldest surviving Neziyana male

(Diokpa Obu). This tradition did not deter her from her decision to fight with the last drop of blood in her. She decides not to leave Africa but to help in saving women especially widows. She wants to empower them by not finishing the 'ikwa Ajadu' rites. She decides within herself to truncate the whole exercise and with the help of Nkechi, sneaks out of the house at night to meet two female teachers in a mission school who had passed through the ikwa Ajadu rites to intimate her. One of the teachers, Anita, narrates her ikwa Ajadu experience:

I submitted myself to the whims of the 'umuada'. I sat in ashes in a shanty hut with a leaking roof for two weeks. ... At the end of it all, I took the bath with the corpse water without flinching... When my hair was shaved, I thought it was all over. I felt fulfilled. Then came the night of the wake keep, I was tactfully lured into the room where my husband was lying in state, ... All through the night, I kept awake. Initially, the stench was unbearable ... At daybreak, they opened the door and took the body out for interment. I was taken to a part of the compound where a kind of barricade was made with palm fronds. There I stayed under heavy guard of those merciless women till the cannons were fired to announce the interment at noon. I was not allowed to go near the grave during the burial. It is an abomination for a woman to see her husband buried. If she does, the villagers will all leave, including the chief priest of Aja Ani... Above all, the house was being looted of valuables on daily basis. When I tried to raise an eyebrow, I was fined a he-goat for accusing my husband's people of theft...(193-194)

She narrates her ordeals further;

On the Ikwa-Ajadu night, I was led to the market square in pitch darkness illuminated only by a weak light from a local lamp which one of the old women carried... At the

market square, my hands were securely tied behind me with strings of cowry shells. Then the chief priest stuffed my mouth with *omu* and warned me sternly never to let the fronds fall off my mouth. Then to my horror, they began to take off my clothing ... I was stripped stark naked by the small men... I could not open my mouth for fear of letting the *omu* go. I was led like that; nude without any item of clothing to the village stream. There the chief priest broke more than a dozen eggs all over my body. He used his hands to smear the eggs into every orifice of my body. He made me bend over with my head down between my knees. From that painful position, I could hear him panting with animal passion as he repeatedly smeared the raw egg into my private parts. I was nauseated and the *omu* fell off my mouth as I retched and retched. Then I shouted and yelled into the night like a demented animal. The chief priest was incensed and stuffed my mouth with some dirty rags. Then the women shoved me into the stream. I thought they were going to drown me and I spluttered and kicked out violently with my legs. The kick sent one of the little men flying and he landed with his back on the riverbank. He got up painfully, swearing obscenities at me. The chief priest threatened to drown me in the river if I gave them any more troubles. Then the two dwarfs proceeded to bath me. ... My arms tied behind me were getting numb and lifeless. Then to my horror, the chief priest and the dwarfs began to undress, they were panting with passion. When I realized what they were about to do, tears of humiliation and frustration flowed from my eyes. I started retching again but the vomit could not flow because my mouth was gagged. I was being suffocated. As the chief priest came near me, I kicked out at him with my leg. It hit his lower region and he doubled over in pains. The old women and the dwarfs shouted out in anger. Then, they took hold of

my legs and forcefully tore them apart. I wanted to die, I craved for death but death was nowhere near. The chief priest and the dwarfs began to take turns on me in that position. I must have passed out for I woke up in a hospital bed two weeks later. I was badly compromised.197

These types of abominable acts are what women fight against through their writings. The United Nations recognizes the importance of equality and women's empowerment as captured in one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 'A renewed focus on gender equality and women empowerment'. (22) Anita in her narration, said that she was hospitalized for months because she suffered from nervous breakdown. She became unstable mentally and so was placed on sedative for weeks as she howled and shouted most of the time. The worst part of this barbaric act was that she was pregnant for one of the dwarfs. The nightmare never left her till date. When she came back from the hospital still weak, the eldest male child in her family came with the Chief Priest for the inheritance rights, Anita's children taking them unawares whipped them with horse whips and sticks. The blows rained on them left, right and center... it had never been heard in the history of the village that the Priest of Aja Ani was challenged by anyone not to talk of being horse whipped.(202). 'The children seized his staff of office 'oji' and threatened to burn it and at last the priest was forced to swear that he would never in his life set foot in our compound again.... Above all, he swore with his life and office never to directly or indirectly hurt any member of our family' (205). This is absolute liberation, her children got liberated and empowered her. Finally, Anita and her immediate family members were excommunicated but gradually they were accepted back much later.

The other woman, Cheta also narrates her own ordeal following her husband's demise. Her husband travelled for the burial ceremony of his brother and never came back. He was presumed dead. She (his wife) was tagged a murderer who had

killed her husband. With this she was asked to appear naked before the elders to swear that she did not kill her husband. Cheta narrates her story, 'After this I carried the coffin - heavy and stinking casket on my bare head right round the village'.(212) This singular act killed her(the narrator's) mother and left her father a broken man.(212). She was later forced to drink the water used in washing the corpse. After all these, a report came that her husband was still alive. In the midst of the horror, one wonders whose corpse was paraded and buried. Andrew Mitchell puts it this way:

By contrast, where women and girls are treated as inferior to men and boys, a vicious circle of limited education, poor employment opportunities, ill health, forced marriages and all too frequently violence and exploitation can be established and perpetuated. (4)

Lucia went home fortified and ready to ensure that her faulty root (because she is a black American) should be mended, reformed and redirected. She is out to fight for widows and by extension, women's liberation, freedom and empowerment; she actually did this during her husband's burial. She first of all shoves heaps of sand into the husband's grave and the whole village stand still for it is an abomination for her to do that. The chief priest immediately moves towards Lucia wanting to hit her with his staff of office, only to be stopped by one of her sons. In his effort to hit the boy, the chief priest falls in the grave and it is considered an abomination for the red mud from the grave to touch him. With this abominable act, he is now traditionally dead and can no longer perform his duties. The worst part is that no body can perform the cleansing rites on him as he is the highest traditionalist in the village. This act makes the office of the chief priest vacant.

This is total liberation as Lucia's act grants widows liberation and empowerment, thus, "... hardly did she know that she singlehanded destroyed an age long tradition... the Chief Priest ...had been defiled and henceforth ceased to be Chief Priest of Aja Ani. A defiled hand cannot serve the gods'.(237). This becomes

great and spectacular news and which ushers in change in the village' Women can equally be liberated through other means as Adeyemo rightly noted. Wuraola Adeyemo C. recommends qualitative education for the girl child to help liberate and empower women from the shackles of doom. She goes ahead in her article 'Widowhood and its Harmful Practice: Causes, Effects and the Possible way out for Widows and Women folk' to write that women can be liberated by engaging themselves in enlightenment programmes and vocational skills learning.(1)

Conclusion

Recognizing women's importance and power is the utmost in the text under study. Women wield a lot of power inwardly that when they are determined to carry out an assignment, it must surely be done and done very well. Unfortunately, women are seen negatively and positively in the text. Negatively, women seem to be their own problem as they are seen in the helm of affairs to intimidate their fellow women (widows) even though they themselves also regard these practices as dehumanizing, obnoxious, degrading and anachronistic. During the burial rites, sitting on ashes and Ikwa Ajadu, women especially the Umuada play very vital roles to the detriment of their fellow women. The Umuada tend to punish widows by ensuring that these widows suffer as they ensure traditional rites are followed to the letter. In such cases, women play oppressive roles by subjugating fellow women.

Positively, Lucia started her liberation and empowerment mission when she refused to shout and cry after the demise of her husband. This continued when she refused to complete the fourteen days sitting on the ashes. The climax and the apex of empowerment took place on the burial day. Lucia and Anita liberated widows and women at large by their act during their husbands' burial. In fact, they are heroines and must be celebrated by their communities. Lucia's act is wonderful as she has decided to start the revolution by empowering widows and the women folk because nobody will ever question women or insist on performing the ikwa Ajadu on any

widow in that community again. The writer concludes that this has actually opened a new phase of life for the women, a new life of freedom, liberation, recognition and empowerment.

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