

**COMMODIFIED BODIES: A SEXUAL EXPLORATION OF WOMEN IN
IFEOMA CHINWUBA'S *MERCHANTS OF FLESH*, Donissongui TUO**
(Université Péléforo Gon Coulibaly- Korhogo - Côte d'Ivoire
naga_lourou_2007@yahoo.fr

Abstract

The scourge of human trafficking has recently garnered special literary attention characterized by the profusion of literary productions to address the issue. Drawing upon some Postcolonial concepts such as glocalization, dislocation, dependency theory and agency and radical feminism, the current paper provides an analysis of commodified female bodies in Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh*. In this framework, it seeks to analyse on the one hand, how the political and socio-economic factors and mechanisms produce and reproduce emigration from African countries to European 'promised lands'; and on the other, how these factors are the root causes of the trafficked characters' slavery-like conditions in the destination countries. More importantly, the crux of the analysis is to show how the once-commodified bodies summon courage and strength to curb the phenomenon of sex trafficking to become free and self-achieved characters.

Keywords: commodified bodies, human trafficking, illegal emigration, self-achievement.

**CORPS VENDUS : UNE EXPLORATION SEXUELLE DES FEMMES
DANS *MERCHANTS OF FLESH* D'IFEOMA CHINWUBA**

Résumé

Le fléau du trafic humain a récemment retenu une attention littéraire caractérisée par la profusion d'œuvres pour aborder la question. S'appuyant sur des concepts du postcolonialisme tels que la glocalisation, la dislocation, la théorie de la dépendance, l'action et le féminisme radical, le présent article offre une analyse des corps féminins vendus dans *Merchants of Flesh* d'Ifeoma Chinwuba. Dans ce cadre, il essaie d'une part, d'analyser comment les facteurs et mécanismes politiques et socio-économiques produisent et reproduisent l'émigration des pays Africains vers les 'terres promises' Européennes ; et d'autre part, comment ces facteurs et mécanismes sont les causes fondamentales des conditions d'esclavage des personnages trafiqués dans leur pays d'accueil. Mieux, le nœud de l'analyse est de montrer comment ces corps commodifiés prennent courage et force pour venir à bout du phénomène du trafic sexuel afin de devenir des personnages libres et auto-accomplis.

Mots clés : Auto-accomplissement, corps vendus, émigration illégale, trafic humain,

Introduction

The post-colonial societies seem to be politically, socially and economically fractured and disoriented ones. They seem to be characterized by political instability, corruption, bad leadership culminated in a general pauperisation of the masses. Thus, the great lust for materials, wealth and profit creates money-grabbing mentalities where everything, human beings included, is saleable. Human trafficking under the

cover of immigration has for long remained hidden and unknown due to the subterfuges and tricks its practitioners make use of. About this ghostly business, Anthony Ebebe Eyang and Augustine Edung in "The Dynamics of Economism and Human Trafficking in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh*" quoting Patricia write "human trafficking is clandestine in nature and is carried out in most cases unnoticed and not indicated as a criminal network". (A. E. Eyang and A. Edung, 2017, p.103) Along with other writers such as Amma Darko, *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Chris Abani, *Becoming Abigail* (2006), and Chika Unigwe, *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh* bring under the literary spotlight the heinous women's trafficking, coercion and transnational sexual exploitation. Houle-Eicher perfectly captures this in his thesis memoir:

Trafficking is an umbrella term that includes both forced labour and forced prostitution, while both forms of trafficking include hard, physical labour, exploitative methods of psychological bondage, and the vicious circle of entrapment, sex trafficking mostly targets women since they are considered the most vulnerable. Additionally, sex trafficked persons are also subjected to rape, as well as other forms of sexual and physical violence. (H.Eicher, 2021, p. 10)

In the same perspective of Houle-Eicher, Lèfara Silue (2018) argues that «La signification du corps dans *Merchants of Flesh* d' Ifeoma Chinwuba» how female bodies in *Merchants of Flesh* are taken hostage on the backdrop of mercantile profits. He demonstrates how the suffering bodies experience torture and sexual abuses in the hands of both men and women. He tries to show how female bodies in postcolonial societies such as Nigeria metaphorizes and reactivates the triangular trade.

The shift between Houle-Eicher and Silue's analyses and the current paper is that it not only shows the push factors of the emigrant girls but above all, it tries to describe how going to Italy is the result of a failed postcolonial leadership and the incapacity of leaders to bring the masses to the expected socio-economic development. Better still, it seeks to demonstrate how the sexually abused girls succeed in overcoming their situation through a cathartic renewal.

More pertinently, Chinwuba's novel is a pathetic and a vivid account of these post-colonial women's grievance in a "glocalized" world. (B. Ashcroft *et al.*, 2007, p. 104) The Nigerian radical feminist imagines the lives and experiences of young girls lured from Nigeria and forced into prostitution and sexual exploitation in Italy by the traffickers called 'the Madams' (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.247) as middle women. In a revolted tone, the narrator lays bare the traumatic experiences of these young girls in search of a better life.

Thus, the questions that the novel raises are: what are the push factors of the girls' emigration to Italy? What are their status and living conditions in this so called Promised Land? And how do they end up in overpowering their victimizers to retrieve their freedom and self-accomplishment?

Drawing up on some postcolonial concepts such as *glocalization*, *dislocation*, *dependency theory* and *agency* and radical feminism, the current paper

purports to explore how the colonial legacies and contemporary *glocalization*¹ buttress the transnational business of forced prostitution. It also analyses how this forced prostitution and its related psycho-physical violence constitute a driving force for victims' rebellion. The postcolonial theory seems to cope with the heinous situation of the characters under study as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin rightly put it:

The field of postcolonial studies now includes the vexed subjects of contemporary neo-colonialism: the identities and relationships (...) and hybrid subjectivities of various kinds. These subjects, who slip between boundaries of the grand narratives of history and nation, are becoming an increasingly important constituency for post-colonial studies. (B. Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000, p. viii)

As for the radical feminism, it will help us better analyse how the psycho-physical dimensions of the oppressed girls prompt them to rebellion and freedom; as Jane Pilcher & Imelda Whelehan illustrate, "in radical feminist analyses, it is masculine control over women's bodies through sexuality or male violence in the form of rape that is regarded as being of central importance." (J. Pilcher & I. Whelehan, 2004, p. 93-94)

To bring this to fruition, the work is structured into three sections. The first part shows the socio-economic reasons that prompt migrant to venture into unknown countries. The second section analyses the psycho-physical pains on the backdrop of 'financial cannibalism'. The last part demonstrates how these traumatic experiences motivate victims to opt for freedom and emancipation.

1. Colonial "Legacies" as the Push Factors of Illegal Emigration

As a writer of the new generation, most of the themes of Chinwuba's works shift from colonial-related issues to the fight against postcolonial evils and the call for change. As some of African postcolonial leaders fall short to take up the new and pressing challenges their people face soon after independence, Africa seems to be characterized by bad leadership with its corollaries of corruption, joblessness, poor living conditions and endemic poverty. The narrating voice informs about the desperate cry of characters, "the government is useless. Useless. Useless!" (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.103) Before this novel of Chinwuba Achebe alluded to this bad leadership in *The Trouble with Nigeria* in these terms:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. (C. Achebe, 1983, p.1)

¹First popularized in the English world by the British sociologist Roland Robertson in the 1990s, and later developed by Zygmunt Bauman, the term 'glocal' and the process noun 'glocalization' are formed by blending the words 'global' and 'local'. Both terms became aspects of business jargon during the 1980s, originating in Japan, but its use for post-colonial studies has been principally in its foregrounding of local agency against a seemingly relentless global culture. (B. Ashcroft *et al.*, 2007, p. 104)

The advent of colonialism with its new ways and practices such as education, urbanization, currency and individualism have gravely altered Africans minds and bodies. The economy of subsistence has been replaced by the market economy; the aggrandizement of villages into towns swept brotherhood and solidarity away for individualism and mercantilism to take place. In this postcolonial society, women seem to bear the heaviest burden of this bad governance of the first elite. If they are not victims of a non-tolerant traditional society, they are victims of modern ways exigencies. Stephen Ocheni & Basil C. Nwanko concur with this as follows:

Consequently, on attainment of independence by most African states from their colonial overlords, it was extremely very difficult to disentangle from the colonial perfected role for the state because of the systematic disarticulation in the indigenous economy and the intrinsic tying of the same with the external economy of the colonisers. (...) the deep-seated corruption in most African states and the selfish behaviour of some of the political leaders to sit tight in office even when they have obviously outlived their usefulness in the eyes of their people, are attributable to the effects of colonialism. (S. Ocheni & B. C. Nwanko, 2012, p.46)

Here, Ocheni and Nwanko clearly tell how the *dependency theory* is skilfully enacted by the colonizer. In disrupting African economic systems, they imposed up on African this economic dependence. As such, the introduction of new currencies intended to sweep away African economic systems. Bill Ashcroft *et al.* define the dependency theory as a:

Theory [that] offers an explanation for the continued impoverishment of colonized 'Third World' countries on the ground that underdevelopment is not internally generated but a structural condition of global capitalism (...) such 'underdeveloped' countries are usually formerly colonized states that are actually prevented by the forces of global capitalism, from independent development." (B. Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000, pp. 59-60)

In *Merchants of Flesh*, Chinwuba focuses her literary attention on women-related concerns: polygamy, excision, forced marriage and widowhood that not only endanger their lives but above all hamper their freedom and emancipation. The case in point of this sadistic society in the novel is that of Angelina. About the lot of this widow, the narrator says "Angelina bemoaned her fate. Now that Isaac was gone, the only thing certain about her future was its bleakness. His property would be shared amongst his brothers. And yes, the widow would also be inherited by one of them (...) (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.50)" This quotation informs the reader about the pitiable lot of Nigerian women who are disposable from one man to another. The word 'bleakness' infers the sufferings and pains that await the widow after the death of her husband since she is dispossessed of the latter's property. About the conditions of contemporary African women Ato Quayson contends that "contemporary conditions for women are greatly aggravated in the Third World, where women's existences are strung between traditionalism and modernity." (A. Quayson, 2007, p. 585)

Education, rapid urbanization, the introduction of new currency by the colonial system ushered new mentalities in African societies. In this perspective, to paraphrase Laura E. Chasen, African people must live up to the expectations of both the rural and urban spaces and both the traditional and ever-changing modern life standards.

In a non-linear narrative, Chinwuba weaves the capitalist language around a group of young girls with Faith Moses as the main protagonist. The story by navigating between Nigeria and Italy informs the reader about this environment of global economy between these two countries. Bill Ashcroft *et al.* term globalization as “the process whereby individual lives and local communities are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate world-wide” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2007, p.100) Therefore, African people are affected by these economic realities that bypass the boundaries of their states. In the same way, Anthony Giddens argues that “capitalism has been such a fundamental globalizing influence precisely because it is an economic rather than a political order.” (A. Giddens, 1994, p. 184) Consequently, some of the basic reasons that push African women in “the Belly of the Atlantic” to be found at the intersection of colonial and neo-colonial histories.

Locally, all the same, these young girls are eager to abscond from their native land because of the socio-economic pressures, the inability of political leaders to provide the masses with school system capable of guaranteeing a promising future. Chinwuba couches this failure of the political class in the conversation between Lizzy and Faith:

Our people are so used to suffering that they cannot imagine a better life elsewhere ...what of ordinary water to drink? If rain does not fall here, some of us will not be able to catch water to drink. This is in a big town like this, imagine in the villages. Half of the thing killing our people is dirty water, lack of clean water. (I. Chinwuba, 2003, pp. 45-46)

As it can be noticed these dire living conditions of the masses is the outcome of corruption, embezzlement and lack of vision of the political class. In the same perspective, this disillusionment and the ensuing unemployment bring about an environment of endemic poverty that cripples the masses. Faith is the perfect embodiment of this poverty. She shares this poverty with other citizens in a precarious and least salubrious area. Faith voices her poverty:

I am poor, poor, poor. How can I not be when I am an ordinary ward-maid in a third rate, rundown clinic? I have three mouths to feed and no husband to support me. I am not well-educated so I cannot get a better job. I have in me all the ingredients for poverty, unending poverty.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 31)

The repetition of the word ‘poor’ alludes to or highlights the high scale of poverty in this town; the demographic factors coupled with unemployment create this hard living condition. This justifiably vulnerabilizes people and propels them to perceive Europe as an earthen paradise. Meza Hein de Haas concurs with me by observing that “African migration to Europe is commonly seen as a tidal wave of desperate people fleeing poverty ...at home trying to enter the elusive European El Dorado.” (H. H. Meza, 2008, p.1305)

Furthermore, inappropriate to African realities soon after the independence, the western educational system did not create equal job opportunities for people. Conversely, it generated a lot of school dropouts with its corollary of joblessness and extreme poverty. The “batch of girls” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 63) that is about to leave to Italy is the perfect illustration of the failure of the educational system, “they are all dropouts” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 180) the narrator testifies. These girls,

particularly Faith, are victims of the western individualism ushered in African mind. In a world that has become too demanding, solidarity no more exists. Each member straddle to make ends meet. The narrator expresses this cynicism as follows:

The crash put paid to Faith's education, and caused her sun to set at midday. Her mother, then a petty trader at the market couldn't afford her school fees. Her distant uncles and aunts and relatives would not assist her. Who would help another person's child to "further" her education whilst his own children too thick-brained to study were idling away? Welcome, Faith. Welcome to the club of dropouts." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 34)

The rhetorical question in the quotation convincingly informs about the individualistic ideology that dominates this African postcolonial society. There is no more any mutual assistance and no help that formerly characterized African communities. In so doing, Faith and the other girls became the victims of the situation, the victims of a socio-political failure.

In this 'glocalized' world tainted with capitalist desires, Chinwuba portrays money-greedy parents who use their daughters as pawns. Since "there is no future here for anybody in this country", (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 47) the western world remains the only place that provides 'greener pastures.' Understandably, driven by the lust for the new world's comfort, well-being, and luxury parents trample down marriage, one of the most important social institutions. As such, marriage became a hindrance to economic success. For that, girls are warned against marrying too early. Here goes the warning, "you say you want to marry. If I hear 'marry' from you again, I will slap okra seeds from your smelly mouth, fathers admonished their daughters who fell in love and wanted to settle down before seeing Italy. Now it was see Italy and die." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 66) Here, parents' lust for money is clear enough, for them, girls going to Italy will surely help them out of their impoverished situations. As such, daughters therefore become saleable 'properties' in these fathers' hands. Through this quote, Chinwuba clearly informs the reader how the ubiquitous capitalist desires have gravely pervaded the postcolonial society. Faith's mother is antsy to become member of "The International Ladies' Club" (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.227). She sees in her daughter's going to Italy the footbridge to socio-economic uplift.

In an enjambement and flashback narrative strategy, Chinwuba describes how postcolonial Nigeria is mired in the 'glocal' (Ashcroft *et al*, 2000, p.104) capitalist ideology. The 'financial cannibalism' interfered every domain of life. As such, in this cosmopolitan town, abortion is no more a crime, but a common and popular practice. It is a source of wealth for practitioners. The narrative voice accounts "that day, they had performed eleven abortions and she had held the tray throughout. Yes, abortion was a lucrative business." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 39) In the same line of thought, the Nigerian author presents characters bewildered by the desire to possess the "Mighty Dollar" (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 60) indulged in the hideous trade of human flesh. She presents to the readers this cannibal market in Nigeria where human parts are tradable for economic purposes. Indeed, the economic pressures of the urban life, "this life of permanent want and insufficiency" (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. 31) turns people into traders of their likes. Here goes the incredible account of the narrator:

Those of them who were medicine men or who worked for juju men always have their gallons and thermos flasks and bottles about. You would think they had come to Duku to fetch water, No. The containers were used to gather as much blood as they could from the victims' injuries ... Duku provided free, fresh, hot human blood. If you wanted human body parts, you could have them too. (I. Chinwuba, 2003, pp. 32-33)

From this quotation one understands to what extent mercantilism has hollowed people out of any sense of humanism. This economic cynicism leads them to commodify human blood and flesh. Chinwuba echoes this economic practice as being part of the end results of colonial legacies in African new nations.

In concluding, I can say that the bad leadership perpetrated in African newly independent nations culminated in poverty, poor educational system and other socioeconomic sufferings propel disillusioned Africans to embark for most promising worlds. Indeed, Chinwuba's girls see their future in Nigeria as blurred and gloomy. Thus, illegal immigration and the ensuing sexual exploitation are the consequences of post-colonial problems and uncertainties; a major factor responsible for this hazardous adventure is the quest for economic survival and better living conditions. Unfortunately, these would-be travellers cannot work out the dangers that await them.

2. Cruising to Europe: A Metaphor of a Psycho-physical Agony

The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime of 15th November 2000 in its third article (a) defines trafficking in these terms:

Trafficking in Persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat, or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery or the removal of organs.

Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh* echoes this definition in such a way that the narrative is a shocking revelation of the heinous transcontinental sex trafficking by the means of 'fraud and deception' of economically vulnerable young girls. The literary vignette at the very onset of the novel plunges the reader into the turpitudes, grievance and moans of these Nigerians adventurers. "The lifeless body was discovered a few days later, by the legendary Good Samaritan. The winter cold had preserved the upper parts like a natural mortuary" (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p. xi) This prologue concerning the death of Lovett, one of the prostitutes foreshadows the mortification that awaits the poor and innocent victims. It mirrors the hellish life that ranges from economic exploitation to different physical violence (beatings, hunger, rape, etc) psychological sufferings and murder.

In the narrative, Chinwuba showcases the situation of a group of girls once outside their home country – Nigeria- became fully and helplessly dependent on a cabal of power, exploiters who treat them like commodities to be used up until the

maximum profit is extracted out of them. This diasporic community, (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000, p.66) victims of illegal migration are psychologically dislocated beings. They are what Heidegger quoted by Ashcroft *et al.* terms *unheimlich* or *unheimlicheit*-literally 'unhousedness' or 'not-at-homeness.' (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000, p.65). Indeed, the hellish environment in which these girls found themselves entrapped are to be viewed at two major levels. They are first victims of their traffickers and then of the destination country.

The criminal network set in Nigeria and in the Italian cities is well organized around treacherous, fraudulent practices and hoodwinks. For the girls to be 'tamed' as easy preys in their hands, Madam Lizzy Johnson and her clique resort to tenebrous supernatural spirits vested in Igirigidinta.:

This is Igirigidinta's shrine. He is the most powerful medicine man alive in Nigeria today. ...Once Igirigidinta has tied a knot, no one alive can untie it. You are about to swear with your life and your mother's life that you will pay back the money you owe this madam that is sponsoring you to Italy. You will swear that never will you reveal details of this deal to the police or to other people, never. (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.199)

This quotation makes one read about Lizzy's maliciousness; in constraining the girls to take this devilish oath. They aim at making them morally and financially indebted to them. They must 'pay back the money' to their 'benefactors' and also swear that 'never will they reveal the details of the deal' to anyone. In other terms, it is a conscience robbery that consists in formatting the victims' mind into fear, silence and secrecy. Furthermore, if the African method consists in oath taking, European one is to make the girls sign an agreement to reimburse the money spent on them during their voyage. Faith, the main protagonist declares, "to cut the whole matter short, I signed the agreement to pay back eighty million lira." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.242). Worse still, in their covetousness, these debts are "grossly inflated." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.61). Thus, these methods contribute not only to vulnerabilize and morally fragilize the girls but above all forecast the hellish life that awaits them.

The nightmarish life in which Faith and the other girls will be immersed in Italy starts by a series of inhuman practices and treatments. Their objectification begins with the stripping of their human identity and dignity. Though relocated in Italy by their so called 'saviours', the girls appeared dislocated and alienated. One of the fiercest tools in the hands of the criminal gang rests on the invisibility and illegality of their victims. In this perspective, once in the 'promised land', before starting the "road work", they are deprived of their papers. "Their travelling documents would have been taken from them and perhaps used to ferry in other girls". (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.178), the narrator informs. The stripping of their identities is also revealed in the name change. Lizzy's instructions to Faith are clear enough, "first, you will change your name. Faith Moses is not good for this work. We do not want the police to know your real name. You will simply be called Joy, Gioia in Italo. You will bring joy to your customers." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.239) As such, for Lizzy, Faith is to be used as an object that provides men with joy and pleasure. This is an indication that in *Merchants of Flesh*, the 'Madams' (the traffickers') economic success rests on the sexual marketability of black bodies. Without legal documents, the girls only exist as sexualized commodities in Italian cities rather than citizens. Consequently, the girls' illegal existence in Italy literally

renders them wandering 'ghosts' or invisible subjects whose bodies are deprived of legal name and national citizenship. As a matter of fact, they are treated as empty repositories for male sexual pleasure. Abou-Bakar Mamah best illustrates this identity crisis:

The name change is one of the mysteries of the migration process... They are the ones known as illegal or clandestine immigrants. The rationale behind the pursuit of forging a new identity is mainly related to the migration protocols that could put immigrants' residency in jeopardy. But, the fortuitous acceptance to bear a new name will force an immigrant into double-exile once on the promised land. Therefore, it is a social construction that is embedded in the collective imagination as a sine qua non abdication leading to the rebirth of another self whose real nature cannot be conceived of in advance. (A.B. Mamah, 2021, p.32)

From this, it can be stretched that name change greatly involves a re-birth, a self-denial, becoming 'other' with new life styles, new images that best suit the new 'job'.

As Chinwuba unfolds her story, one is more and more acquainted with the atrocious image of transnational sex trafficking. *Merchants of Flesh* is then another clarion call to all of well-meaning people to join hands in building a free and humane society. A society with no exploitation, no oppression on the backdrop of mercantilism. Denise Thompson concurs and writes "Feminism is a social enterprise, a moral and political framework concerned with redressing social wrongs." (D. Thompson, 2001, p.x) The dire experiences of Faith and the other girls (moral sufferings, physical pains and trauma) are instantiations of these 'social wrongs'. Noticeably, the relation of the triad middlemen-girls-customers is characterized by economic exploitation, sexual violence, and mental torture. Quoting Willy Thompson Abou-Bakar Mamah argues that "violence and economic exploitation are closely intertwined." (A. B. Mamah, 2021, p.31). Driven by the lust for economic success, traffickers submit the girls to dehumanizing practices, they deprive them of their womanhood, of their corporeal integrity. The repeated and daily sexual intercourses instantiate this. The narrative voice accounts:

The other day I was told that each of these girls has to pay her madam eighty or ninety million lire in two years. That is forty-five thousand US dollars. ... I concluded that for her to be able to pay that amount in that time, she has to sleep with at least three to four thousand men... tell me, a woman who has slept with four thousand men, is there anything left in her? (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.178)

'Sleeping with at least three thousand men' provides an insight into the physical and emotional sufferings of the victims. These perpetual sexual intercourses marred the body and greatly affect the psyche because in Zoe Norridge's terms "there exists fluid boundaries between mental and physical sufferings." (N. Zoe, 2013, p.10)

The congregation of Madams euphemistically called "The Best Sisters International Social club" (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.84) reap capital from these bodies who became saleable properties, "the market now called for younger girls, virgins if available. It cost up to four million lira in Italy to deflower them... but these seven, when they arrive may not retail for me, they will go wholesale." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, pp.65-66) This mercantile language of Lizzy Johnson informs about money-greedy

characters ready to objectify their likes for financial purposes. Thus, through this attitude of women becoming victimizers of women, Chinwuba questions Feminism in Africa and abroad. Lois Tyson names this category patriarchal women, explained as follows “by patriarchal woman I mean, of course, a woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy.” (T. Lois, 2006, p.85). Likewise, Denise Thompson illustrates how the ideology of patriarchy is deeply entrenched in men and women’s mind that they end up perceiving the phenomenon as ‘natural’ and irreversible, “the social conditions of male supremacy function most efficiently to the extent that women (and men) accept the reality of their position, embrace it as natural and unalterable, desire its continuation and fear its destruction, and believe it is their own meaningful existence.” (D. Thompson, 2001, p.22)

These abject girls whose dreams of economic stability have been shattered are then subjected to slavery-like conditions, and since “there was no escape”, (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.152) they undergo physical and psychological tortures and do not have any agency to fight back the system. Indeed, parachuted in an environment linguistically and administratively alien to them the trafficked girls are easy and resigned pawns in the hands of the heartless mobs. And for this resignation to be total, the devilish club resorts to worse physical violence to discourage any inclination to rebellion or revolt. Any stubbornness is harshly punished to curb the ‘deviant’ into submission and make her abide by the law of the market because “time is money.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.72) Caro’s ill-treatment by Madam Lucy her Master is a case in point:

Frustrated, Madam had grabbed a pair of scissors and cut off Caro’s left ear. The other girls had intervened, pleading with Madam to allow her take the ear to the Emergency Room of the hospital nearby. The doctors would be able to stitch it back. To everyone’s horror, Madam had picked the ear lobe on the floor and had proceeded to cut it into strips of spaghetti. (I. Chinwuba, 2003, pp.112-113)

‘Cutting the ear lobe’ shows the cynicism and cruelty of these madams. Likewise, Chinwuba puts to the fore the agony of these road workers through the inhuman treatment Lizzy inflicts to Tina. Indeed, Tina’s refusal to cooperate and work for her madam results in her being infected by AIDS virus. The narrator accounts, “when Lizzy could not stand Tina’s stubbornness any more, she sent for Ali. ... The other girls held Tina down when Ali was raping her. Lizzy had plugged on her pressing iron. When Ali had emptied his virus-ridden semen inside the hysterical girl.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.74)

The language barrier, the illegality and physical tortures cripple and weaken the girls to undertake means of escape to the extent that death appears to be the only salvaging way. The narrator compassionates, “which life? Is this a life that we are living? Me, I want to get the disease and die. This is not life.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.152) This sentence gives an insight in a dispirited and hopeless mind; in other terms, this cry of despair of the characters is the end result the transnational sex trade.

From what precedes, Chinwuba presents female bodies as commodities that are sold and bought in Italian cities. She depicts this transborder sex trade as a depersonalizing and dehumanizing phenomenon for womenfolk. In placing her literary spotlight on this modern-day slavery, the Nigerian writer calls for effective actions to curb it. Admittedly, the sexual exploitation narrative analysed in this

section can generate an almost paralyzing sense of resignation and defeat because of the cruel treatments that tend to confiscate the victims' bodies and souls. And yet, some characters still have the necessary stamina to draw from their sufferings the fuel of rebellion and self-enfranchisement.

3. Unbinded Bodies: Healing and Redeeming the Body and Soul

Chinwuba's narrative deconstructs this Eurocentrism installed by colonial literature; the formerly held discourse ushered in Africans' minds that Europe is the *El Dorado* with a decent and luxurious life. In fact, from the postcolonial stance, she successfully demonstrated that Europe is not that idyllic place where wealth and comfort flow in profusion. Indeed, the impoverished environment which Faith Moses discovers is the perfect instantiation of this colonial prevarication. Her disillusionment is accounted for in this way:

We arrived in Milan Central Station in the afternoon. I was disappointed at the buildings I saw. They looked so old. I even saw white people who were beggars and homeless. They lay in corners and benches in the cold. And I wondered, Poor people, here? White people, beggars? Homeless? Just like back home. (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.236)

At the structural level, the three rhetorical questions clearly explain Faith's disenchantment and are likely to rouse her conscience of how her sponsor Lizzy is tricky. This sad description is a patent warning that their dreams are far from becoming true. Besides this portrayal that foreshadows pains and sufferings and prompts as well some characters to be on the *qui vive*; Chinwuba artistically resorts to an intertextual device that foretells the impending resilience and rebellion. She makes use of orality and storytelling to propel characters to resistance and agency. Once more Ashcroft *et al.* argue that:

Agency refers to the ability to act or perform an action. In contemporary theory, it hinges on the question of whether the things they do are in some sense determined by ways in which their identity has been constructed. Agency is particularly important in post-colonial theory because it refers to the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power. (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000, p.7)

The story of the princess who ran away from tortoise her unloved and deceitful husband instantiates the agency and resistance. It teaches the morality that one must sum up the courage to refuse a situation that hinders his/her freedom and well-being. Osas best sums it up "Mummy, it also tells us that if we do not like something, we should not stay there. We should try and run away. ... If we do not like something, we should not just stay there crying. We should try and do something. Like the princess did." (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.231). This story of the tortoise metaphorizes how both the readers and the characters have to pre-empt the fight against transnational sex trafficking. Marjorie Stone concurs and pens, "more attention to sex trafficking by literary and cultural critics is needed in part (...) because work in these fields can contribute in significant ways to understand and grabbing with the intractable complexities of the issue." (M. Stone, 2005, p.36)

In *Merchants of Flesh*, Chinwuba does not resort to any feminist propaganda to end sexual exploitation but she urges and incites the victims to a cathartic healing of their souls and bodies. Ritusingh Bhal defines it as follows, "a catharsis is an

emotional discharge through which a person can achieve a state of moral or spiritual renewal or a state of liberation from anxiety and stress.” (R. Bhal, 2017, p.78). Then, the radicalism issued from this cathartic cleansing is shouldered by Faith Moses alias Joy who realises that “an injustice had been done to [them] in the guise of help.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.243). Consequently, Faith and her co-sufferers are resolved to overcome their victimhood to evolve into hopeful survivors. Faith implements her experiences of a students’ unionist to galvanize the other girls into actions and subversion. The narrating voice testifies, “we went from joint to joint, preaching this gospel of freedom as it were, this gospel of redemption, of escape, of rebellion. In between the visit of clients, in moments of rest, we would recall the injustice of slaving to death for the benefit of our madams.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.263) Here, the Nigerian author positions the female body as the potential site of ‘norms’ subversion’. Through their bodies and souls, the victims are able to convert their sufferings into a stamina to rebel against the obnoxious and inhuman injustice done to them. About that, Anthony Giddens argues “all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors.” (A. Giddens, 1984: p.16) As such, Faith’s actions are likely to rescue thousands of girls from the exploitative chains binding them to their madams. Thus, “the female body in the texts becomes a medium for resisting physical, psychological and economic totalization and producing agency in the individual female subject.” (L. E. Chasen, 2012, p.5) Laura E. Chasen admits. In the same perspective, M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue that “agency occurs when women do not imagine themselves as victims or dependent of governing structures but as agents of their own lives.” (Alexander *et al*, 1997, p. xxviii)

Noticeably, these salvaging actions are conjointly undergirded by the Church and the Nigerian Council. Their redeeming and restorations endeavours are couched in these rhetorical questions, “do you want your younger sisters left behind to suffer what you did?” “Do you want your children and your nieces to go through what you went through?” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.213) The emphasis in these questions induces insubordination and rebellion. In so doing, the Church wants to rouse victims to active actions so as to put an end to this rampant ‘modern slavery’ that bedevils Nigeria and Africa. Even if Chinwuba does not spare the Italian Church from this sinful practice, she singles out Don Mario Lorenzo the head of the Apostolate for the downtrodden, prostitutes, drug addicts, trafficked women, women forced into the market of flesh as a souls and bodies redeemer. He enacts his restoration and rehabilitation mission through prayers with the prostitutes. “After the song, and led by the Don, prayers were said. The Don distributed short tracts and chapelets to the girls. Some of the prostitutes proceeded to wear the rosary beads around their necks as necklaces.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.222) the narrator testifies.

In the closing chapters of her narrative, Chinwuba vests Faith with the restoration and freedom tasks. She positions her as the clear-sighted character able to organize her fellows to opt for freedom and self-fulfilment. Together with Lovett, they succeed in creating this sisterhood to end their sexual enslavement in Italian cities. With the helping hand of the Church, Faith teaches the word of freedom and self-reconstruction. Fortunately, their actions did pay off; the seeds of rebellion sowed did yield the expected results. They culminate in the arrest of the pimps. The narrator echoes the death knell, “all over Italy and San Marino, the security agents

in anti-riot gear swung into action, arresting madams and freeing their enslaved girls in what was called Operation Freedom.” (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.267) Better still, back home, Kaine, one of the co-traffickers is openly killed by a lynch mob. The death of this trafficker coupled with the handcuff of the madams metaphorize the end of sexual exploitation both in Nigeria and Italy. In the same perspective, the simultaneity of these vigorous actions against transnational sex-trafficking sternly illustrates Chinwuba's advocacy for an international justice to solve transborder matters. After regaining their freedom, the had-been sexual slaves are now reconstructed beings capable of marshalling their own lives. They are, in doing so, now able to lead normal lives with decent works. The narrating voice sympathizes: With their madams arrested and carted away, the girls trooped to the Community Centre as planned. Many were physically sick and were taken to hospitals. ... One by one, their stay in Italy was regularised. Don Lorenzo found normal jobs for the employable ones. Some got cleaning work in companies; others became care providers for the aged and the infirm. Faith got a job as a welfare clerk at the Commune. Her intention was to earn some money for her proposed clinic back home. (I. Chinwuba, 2003, p.273)

To cap it all, Chinwuba, in this section reveals the ruthless treatment of the victims of human trafficking. However, despite these psycho-physical tortures, some characters make use of cathartic therapy to rebel and resist against this heinous practice of sexual exploitation. Indeed, their sense of rebellion and the subsequent freedom has been constructed within the scope of the harsh exploitative conditions that used to leave them with no alternative. Thus, Chinwuba advocates agency, rebellion and self-achievement for these sexually and psychologically exploited bodies to combat sex trafficking. Through the character of Faith, she showcases of how the once traumatically silenced and sexually violated girls garner and organize their painful experiences to exhibit agency and empowerment in order to re-own their bodies and souls.

Conclusion

Writing from the perspective of a woman, Chinwuba, in her *Merchants of Flesh*, has taken a sympathetic approach to grief-stricken experiences of the victims of human trafficking both in Nigeria and Italy. The novel reflects a socio-economic context of poverty as well as colonial and postcolonial uncertainties that generate and propel transnational sex trafficking.

Through the voyeurism, the gruesome descriptions and other exploitative images of sexual violence, the Nigerian writer showcases human trafficking so as to turn physical pains, psychological sufferings, and despair into reflection, cathartic therapy and salvaging actions. This voyeurism does not showcase these girls' nymphomania but it unfortunately underscores this psycho-physical agony of hapless characters who have been enticed with the mirages of promising futures. The impressive use of literary devices, intertextual references, plot, characterization and setting enables her to call for the readers to empathize with the situation of these economically-exploited girls. In this perspective, she envisions resilient female characters endowed with a psycho-physical stamina to overpower the scourge of sex-trafficking. As a postcolonial feminist whose main concern is to right social wrongs, Chinwuba questions the trustworthiness and liability of Feminism to end women's

plights. For that, she seems to advocate Transnational Feminism to better cope with these transborder issues.

Works Cited

- ACHEBE Chinua, 1983, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Heinemann: London.
- ASHCROFT Bill. et al, 2007, *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge: London and New York. (Second edition)
- BHAL Ritusingh, 2017, "Catharsis in Literature", *Professional Panorama: An International Journal of Management & Technology*, Amity University Rajasthan Jaipur, vol.4, Issue1, pp.78-87.
- CHASEN Laura E. B.A, April 23, 2010, "Dislocated Subjects: Transnational Forced Prostitution, African Female Forced Bodies and Corporeal Resistance", Washington, DC. (thesis of Master Degree)
- CHINWUBA Ifeoma, 2003, *Merchants of Flesh*, Gower Literature: Abuja
- DE HASS HEIN Meza, 2008, "The Myth of Invasion: The Inconvenient Realities of African Migration to Europe", *Third World Quarterly*, 29 (7), pp.1305-1322.
- EYANG E. Anthony et al, 2017, "The Dynamics of Economism and Human Trafficking in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh*", *A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 14(2), pp. 103-120.
- GIDDEN Anthony, 1994, "From the Consequences of Modernity" *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Eds. New York: Columbia UP, pp. 181-190.
- 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, London: Polity Press.
- HOULE-EICHER Camille, 2021. "Trafficking and Migrant Sex Work in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*", Université de Montréal. (Thesis of Master Degree)
- JACQUI Alexander M. and MOHANTY Chandra Talpade, 1997, "Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements," *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. Eds, New York: Routledge, pp. xiii-xlii.
- LOIS Tyson, 2006, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 2nd edition, Routledge, New York-London.
- MAMAH Abou-Bakar, 2021, "Transnational Sex Trade: Prostitution, Identity Crisis, and Memories in *On Black Sisters' Street* by Chika Unigwe", *International Journal of African Studies*, pp. 24-36.
- NORRIDGE Zoe, 2013, *Perceiving Pain in African Literature*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- QUAYSON Ato, 2007, "Feminism, Postcolonialism and the Contradictory Orders of Modernity", *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, Malden: Blackwell, pp.585-591.
- OCHENI Stephen & NWANKO, Basil, 2012, "Analysis of Colonialism Impact on Africa", *Cross Cultural Communication*, n° 8, vol. 3, pp.46-54.
- PILCHER Jane & WHELEHAN Imelda, 2004, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.
- SILUE Léfara, 2018, «La signifiante du corps dans *Merchants of Flesh* d'Ifeoma Chinwuba», BRIDGES, *An African Journal of English Studies*, n° 15, pp.113-120.

STONE Marjorie, 2005, "Twenty First Century Global Sex Trafficking: Migration, Capitalism, Class, and Challenges for Feminism now", *English Studies in Canada*; 31, vol.2-3, pp. 31-38.

THOMPSON Denise, 2001, *Radical Feminism Today*, London: SAGE Publication.
The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime. Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000.