

A Literary Reading of Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn* for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

A life without a future is more likely to devolve into violence. A man's sense of right and wrong embodies his worldview, which shapes his morals, beliefs, and values. Consciously or unconsciously, these beliefs fuel a passion for improved living conditions. The novelist under study, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, is Nigerian, and her work critically examines aspects of tradition that have hindered sustainable development in some communities. These societies continue to experience various forms of injustice, including oppression and humiliation, and remain partially unfree. This paper explores the relationship between the passions generated by individual worldviews within these societies and the actions they inspire, with a particular focus on the use of burial rites as a tool in struggles for liberation. To achieve this, Reader Response theory is employed as the most effective approach for illustrating the realities faced by women in the Ibonse community upon the death of their husbands, as well as the efforts made to abolish such dreadful practices. This study contributes to scholarly discourse by examining the causes and consequences of preserving traditions that hinder sustainable development.

Key Words: *Belief system, widowhood, freedom, humiliation*

Introduction

The average Nigerian was filled with hope for political independence. It arrived with the expectation that it would largely address socio-political problems and create opportunities for a more fulfilled life for the average citizen. In the wake of independence, many promises were made. Economic plans were rooted in broad egalitarian principles, with assurances of equal opportunities for all citizens in education, health, and employment. Independence was widely anticipated to herald a

new era of progress for everyone. It came with hopes for economic, social, cultural, and human development for all citizens of the new nation. It was meant to signal a new chapter in the political landscape of the country. Independence was intended to be a turning point, freeing the nation from the shackles of colonial experiences and ushering in the righteousness of self-rule. It was to mark the end of servitude and the conclusion of unfulfilled lives, conflict, brutality, and the pains of economic sabotage.

Great changes are going on in issues concerning women in various parts of the world but it has been proved that much still remains in order to achieve this goal of liberation among women in societies dominated by men. Women still cry over the cruel situation they find themselves especially in Africa. This traumatic condition of women is the capital issue of the moment that attracts discussions in various social environment and workshops. The main preoccupation in this paper is to expose the portrait of women buttressed by a Nigerian author and the emotional versus psychological injury the women go through. Notably, from the earliest period in the history of Nigeria to present, women have made impressive strides in many areas of life. Even in their disadvantaged position, they have competed in the male's domain and are victorious. They struggle against all antagonisms as Abhulimen states breaching from the other side of the barrier where culture and self-interest of men have sought to place them (14-21). Some of these women have made great contribution to nation building.

As women end up in different trends in the novels, they also tend to respond to the issues of oppression and marginalization according to their different perspectives, which is the reason Nnolim refers to the contours as the plethora of feminist theory that are making rounds in current headlines in landscape of feminist ideas (134). The contours of the landscape are uneven and zigzag in see saw of confusion. This is simply because in Nigeria, women are fighting multiple wars. They are not only fighting colonialism and its aftermaths but they are faced also

with traditional et cultural practices and beliefs prevalent in most part of Nigeria such as female genital mutilation, lack of participation in family decision, early girl child marriage, male child preference, denial of women to own and inherit property, ritualistic widowhood rite as seen in the novel under study, *Echoes of a New Dawn*. An attempt to name these struggles gives rise to various phraseologies. As a result, the female author conceptualizes and theorizes African feminism to match her environment, uniqueness, complexity of their oppression as womanism, stiwanism and Negro feminism.

One of the main pre-occupations of many African writers according to Inyama, has been the rehabilitation of the African image(56-66). This concern arose as a reaction or response to the negative, distorted image of Africa and her people presented in literary works and travel reports of European writers and explores. The works of such writers as Joyce Cary, Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, and so on created widely believed images of Africa and her people as wild, untamed, totally ignorant and savage. Such widely accepted notions encouraged European abuse of and contempt for Africa and Africans. Inyama (56-66)) says that in rejecting these images, African writers have in the main, been at pains to highlight the nobility, cultural richness, and social and political cohesiveness of African societies. Achebe for instance, has said that one of his aims in writing his first novel was to show that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans, and that the African world was not, contrary to European belief and notion, one long night of perpetual darkness (53). Achebe is a representative of authors who have adopted the realistic approach in their recreation of the traditional and pre-colonial African world. In such presentation, the writers do not pretend that Africa is a flawless paradise. Rather, they presented African people in a realistic light, with the positive and negative balanced as also seen in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn*. It must be stated again that these writers are neither glorifying their world nor apologizing for its shortcomings.

Their goal is to teach the world that Africa is not the barbaric and irrational continent which Europe took it to be. It has its fair and legitimate share of ignorance, superstition, and ignorance, but it has got wealth of other positive human attributes too.

Theoretical Framework

Reader Response theory is used as the best approach for this paper. In the words of Abraham's reader response theory does not designate any one critical theory, but a focus on the activity of reading a work of literature which is shared by many critical theories (350). It is a critical theory that contains a body of literary investigations, which looks into the nature of the reader's activity in the process of understanding literary texts. The literary proposition of this critical school is that literary works are incomplete until the reader has actualized those elements that are left to his imagination and that literary texts are produced by the strategies of interpretations that guide us to seek certain meaning in the reader's critical interpretation. In effect, Reader response theory turn their attention from a work as an achieved structure of meaning to the responses of the reader as his eye follows a text on the page before him. Abraham declares: By this shift of perspective, a literary work is converted into an activity on the stage of a reader's mind, and what in standard critical analysis had been features of the work itself - including narrator, plot, character, style and structure - are described as an evolving temporary process consisting primarily of expectations and violation, deferments and satisfactions of expectations, in flow of a reader experience (350). In this extent, Reader- response critics of all theoretical persuasions concur to a reasonable degree that the meanings of a text are the production or creation of the individual reader hence that there is no one or incontrovertible or correct meaning, either of the linguistic parts or of the artistic whole of a text. This means that the response of critical readers to a text or work of art can yield multiplicity of meanings

which can be deemed correct as far as the meanings are tangible and critical responses of the reader.

Reader-response critics agree that no one response or interpretation of a work of art has the monopoly of being the best but greatly differed on the major factors that determine a reader's response, the dividing line between objective and subjective responses and the extent, if any, to which a texts limits a reader's response, so as to empower us to reject at least some reading and misreading, even if we are unable to demonstrate that any one reading or response is the right one. From the Reader-response critical perspective, the literary text, as a product of the writer's intentional acts, to a substantial extent, controls the reader's responses to the text, but always contains to a notable degree, some gaps or unintended or indeterminate elements. These gaps, the actual reader must fill in subjectively by a creative participation with what is given in the text before him. It is pertinent at this point to observe that the experience of reading is an evolving process of anticipation, frustration, retrospection and reconstruction. To this extent, critical reading and responses are very serious academic exercise. In summary, Reader-response critical approach involves an informed response to a text or work of art without formal reference to a laid down critical criteria.

Cultural Values in *Echoes of a New Dawn*

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh unlike other literary writers delved into the activities of a known tradition that caged the people of Ibonse especially widows. This has been a long living way of life of the people. Beliefs differ and people love and cherish whatever they meet as their culture from generation to generation. Despite some difficulties and challenges in most of these traditions, many follow it as a result of fear. Either the person is threatened by death or excommunication. The most painful experience in the tradition of Ibonse is the harmful *Ikwa Ajadu*. This has become possible through the selfish and greedy passion the old chief priest has on the widows. Ibonse men are known and are also

educated. They live far in developed cities but the problem of archaic tradition subject their wives to unbearable hardship, humiliation, oppression and trauma. Some women from other closer communities warn their daughters against any relationship with Ibonse men to avert this dreadful mourning tradition in future. Those who have no knowledge of this tradition become victims of a foreign culture as seen in the case of Anita and Lucia. Some would dare the consequences as seen in the novel where Ike's daughter told the mother that her case would be different despite the admonishment as the novelist states, "I was in the secondary school when my elder sister married her heartthrob. We were all delighted at her marriage but my mother kicked vehemently against this seemingly well-matched marriage. We asked her the basis for her objections and she maintained that she had nothing against the young man but she equally pointed out that the traditions of his village were weird and disgusting. In her exact words, Ibonse wallows in the primitivism of too many vile and unspeakable traditions" (209). The above point clears how others from another near community grade Ibonse and what they still practice in the name of culture. From Mrs Ike's voice, it is obvious that there would be no girl in her rightful senses that would accept marriage of Ibonse man. People modernize and polish their tradition to suit the present society and as well, bring about sustainable development to the community. Instead of scary tales, unkind functions and dreadful practices, social life can be illuminated to attract more investment for sustainability. Peaceful environment generates social and healthy humans.

In another development, the state of the family who lost a dear one is portrayed through one of the victims thus, "After the burial, before the *Ikwa Ajadu* rituals, my husband told me he had run short of money and would have to rush down to his station at the northern part of the country to source for funds" (210). The above assertion declares the frustration families are subjected to at the point of mourning of a dear one. Other members of the community stay awake to such acts. They

feel nothing could be done to improve on what they have as tradition. At this point, we see how much people love and cherish their culture. To them, it is what has been and nothing should change it. This becomes the understanding and belief system of a people who have common view. Man made laws to install order in the society. Law is meant for man and not man for law. But in a situation where people subject themselves to a norm that adds no value into their life style, is a contrary view. One wonders how man arrives at this direction. The novelist joins her voice to other positive minds to bring to a change into this and possibly polish the tradition in accordance with new innovations for sustainability. Note that a widow is meant to sit in ash seclusion for three weeks without bathing. She would be fed twice a day through a hole without seeing anyone. Her children would be sent to her own village, branded children of an abominable woman who killed her husband. The innocent children who know nothing about the culture of their people are not spared at this point. Nobody considers the psychological effects of this demented treatment of the children. The young ones who are suppose to be the light and future generation of every given society are crushed that they wish never to have anything common with the said community. They see their own people as wicked and evil. Emotionally, they live with such mentality that everything about their people is demonic.

The novelist further buttressed this singular unkind act through a lady who was meant to mourn a total stranger, "I saw the man in the casket and I told them that it was not my husband. The whole village erupted in anger and made me to carry the casket containing the already decomposing corpse on my head. I was forced to carry this heavy and stinking casket on my bare head right round the village" (212). Not just that the woman was meant to carry the corpse of a strange man round the village, but she was forced to keep wake over the night alone with the strange corpse. Finally, she was meant to drink the water used to bath the decomposing corpse all to prove her innocence. A deep look

and anatomy of the actions of the villagers will reveal the cowardice spirit in them. They are brave at the outside but, cowards and full of fears in the inside. For any sustainable development to take place there must be a peaceful coexistence among the citizens. Lucia, an American wondered why there are more dwarfs in Ibonse community especially among the widows. She was shocked at the revelation made by some widows on how they were raped by the chief priest and dwarfs during the *Ikwa Ajadu* mourning, "I woke up in a hospital bed two weeks later. I was badly compromised. Two months later, the doctor realized that the ailment has taken another dimension. The laboratory tests revealed that I was pregnant. Pregnant for the dwarfs and that crazy burn of a chief priest. I was a wreck, a broken soul, a victim of tradition" (198). The activities of Ibonse people prove the level of education and exposure they have. Even at that, they have their young able youth in a civilized society yet; they do not feel is ripe time to come to a round table to discuss a way forward on what will bring fresh breadth around every corner of their community. Rather, they ignore whatever that goes on; they believe nothing will make them go closer to the village. They forget that at the end, they must return home, alive or dead as seen in the case of Anita and Lucia who married their husbands in the city. They know nothing about the tradition of their people until the death of their husbands. Both Anita and Lucia were visitors in Ibonse. They frown at the fetish satanic tradition of Ibonse. They stood their ground and bent on a reverse on such tradition.

Echoes of a New Dawn and Sustainable Development

In this fast moving global civilization, societies should expunge some of the cultural elements that retard progression. Women are advised to embrace literacy to protect their human rights. Tremendous changes are going on in issues concerning women in various parts of the world but it has been proved that much still remains. Women still cry over the cruel condition they find themselves especially in this part of the world. Nonetheless, women are still oppressed; their sanctrioum position in

both family and society is also neglected especially as a widow. This gloomy status of women in most African societies results to underdevelopment because there is no progress without harmony. In the attempt to set themselves free from the harsh treatment of *Ikwa Ajadu*, Anita and Lucia end up with different complex trends during their mourning period, dislocated the tradition, "The commotion that ensued was monumental. The children vented on them the anger of the past months. The revenge was properly taken. The chief priest knelt before my children ragged like a very demented man forsaken by his kinsmen. The apex came when he lost grip of his *oji* which was his staff of office and the symbol of whatever authority he represented. The children got hold of it, threatened to set it ablaze" (203). Amita's children vented their anger on both the chief priest, their father's elder brother and his most elder sister. They were ready to face banishment from the community. The aim to reduce the chief priest to nothing was their target. Before then, they investigated everything about the power and office of the chief priest, including what can make or mar him. His *oji* remains the main symbol of his office. Anytime he loses that, he is as good as dead. He is to be buried with it at death. Destroying it before him therefore, amounts to reducing him to a living corpse. It marks the end of his malicious ritual rites and other unholy acts he performs as chief priest. If it was known that another person was in possession of the *oji* for just a split second or even less, the chief priest and his entire lineage would be stripped of the revered office and that would be calamity for him. At this point, he has been insulted and humiliated. The children made him to swear never to near their house again take part in any type of attack on the family.

In same way, Lucia a white lady utilized her only opportunity, disgraced the chief priest publicly. This was easier because she paid kin and apt attention to other widows and their gory stories involved in *Ikwa Ajadu*. She planned all this with Nkechi, the sister-in-law who dread the tradition and whatever it represents in Ibonse. She knows

fully well that as a widow, Lucia was not supposed to throw sand into the husband's grave. Such abominable acts must not take place before the chief priest and the other traditional men and women in Ibonse. It is a taboo. Her actions, if successful, would help to usher in a new dawn particularly in Ibonse and the society at large. The novelist exposes this act thus, "The unbelievable was happening before their very eyes. A woman was pouring sand into a man's grave" (323). The plan to destroy the long age tradition gained ground as Lucia's action created a bridge among the people. To worsen the situation, she pushed the chief priest into the fresh grave, continued to pour red sand on him, "Before the fetish priest could regain himself, three or more shovelful of sand had landed on top of him as he lay on the casket. The sand landed with reckless abandon on his head. He struggled up, spat out the sand that got into his mouth and frantically sought to climb out of the grave" (233). His aides were too dazed by the unfolding drama. They stood looking at him in utmost horror. None of them would dare come to his aid. They watched as the woman buried their master without being able to help because he has been contaminated. This traditionally, means he has been buried alive. None dared go near the enraged woman with the shovel for fear of the red mud touching them too. They began to leave one after the other as fast as their legs could take them. There was a flurry of activities as the movement in the compound becomes two-dimensional. The pagan women left and another set of women took their place. There were no fiery-eyed young men to disrupt the activities because there was no longer a chief priest to give the directives. The office of the chief priest has been declared vacant by the unwritten code of tradition. The young men left in confusion like sheep without shepherd. The shepherd has been condemned by the very order he propagated. This also marks freedom for the palm tree that the frond is always cut. The people of Ibonse had never considered the economic problem this their action of cutting the

frond cause in the economy, "At dawn, we woke up to see the gate sealed off with *omu*" (206)

Conclusion

In conclusion, one does not need to journey to Malaysia to recognize that customs and harmful traditional practices against women, including widowhood rites prevalent in many parts of Nigeria as depicted in the novel under study, violate human rights and are incompatible with today's civilized world. The novelist asserts that traditional practices associated with widowhood rites—such as sitting on a heap of ashes for weeks, bathing with wastewater collected from washing the husband's corpse, having a dozen eggs broken and smeared over a widow's body, particularly on her genitals, and, worst of all, forcing the widow to engage in sexual relations with a group of men—are repugnant to natural justice, good conscience, and equity. This discourse rightly condemns the system that perpetuates these practices and advocates for a change in men's mindsets towards these traditions, emphasizing that the sexes are meant to complement each other. It also calls for a novel orientation for our youth regarding the responsible use of masculinity and promotes literacy. This narrative is a protest against injustice, subjugation, oppression, and intimidation faced by widows. The experiences of women in Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn* challenge their humanity and highlight the authenticity of their positive responses. Against all odds, the prevailing attitudes of men towards women are rejected. It is suggested that the ideological systems of exploitation, oppression, and patriarchal power can be reformed. Gender sensitization is crucial, and it is advisable to incorporate it into school curricula, where young girls should learn to assert and defend their rights, particularly their sexual rights. Conversely, young boys should be taught that their sexual advances can be declined and that they must accept rejection without resorting to violence to ensure sustainable development, peace, and unity. Ultimately, women's freedom is envisioned to lead to a balanced

partnership between both genders, achievable only through the collective efforts of families, churches, and other institutions. Grievance is a barrier to the social, economic, and political growth and development of any society.

This paper has revisited the tradition of Ibonse and the activities of the chief priest. A close examination of the chief priest's life, actions, and inactions reveals him to be a coward. He instills fear in the community under the guise of tradition, preventing anyone from questioning his authority. No one dares challenge him, allowing him to hinder the progress and development of the entire Ibonse community. The reign of the chief priest and all that he represented was dismantled when he was pushed into a fresh grave—a taboo in the community. This act was made possible through the collaboration of women, who immediately threw mud on him as Lucia deliberately pushed him into the grave to end his unnecessary greed and the harmful practices inflicted upon widows. There was a sound of joy, signaling a new dawn in Ibonse.

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