

A feminist redefinition of image of women in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn*

Obi, Gladys Nwakaego

Abstract

*This research work examines the image of women in African societies using Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn* as its focus text. Hence, it presents to us some of the numerous problems that usually confront the African women in the traditional African society. Some of these problems include childlessness, widower hood rites, preference of male child, relegation of woman to the background, marriage problems and so on. Just like other feminist works, *Echoes of a New Dawn* gives the writer latitude for extensive intrusion for promoting feminist values. This work explores its theoretical frame work from feminist perspective. This work also is based on literary research getting facts from books, definition from different dictionaries, critical evaluation of the novel and other related literature. This study concludes that a woman person should be allowed to breath because she is a completion of a man person as well as has the right to live.*

Keywords: women, image, Africa, subjugation, degradation.

Introduction

Literature, undoubtedly, has always responded to the responsibility of x-raying the society in a bid to point out what is wrong and, in so doing, point out the way forward. In this regard, the literary artist finds relevance in the society as a social critic, as preacher, corrective icon and so on. The fictional genre has reflected life in its entirety since by its very nature, analyses and appreciates human sensibilities and the idiosyncratic reactions of men and women to their environment.

Literature has ‘Societal Vitality’ in the sense that it associated with the social conditions, values, and social realism in a particular environment. Writers expose what are prevailing in their society through art works. This is to say, that literature captures things that are predominant in a particular society or environment. Therefore, this study is to survey the notion and definition of the major interest of this work which is ‘Image’ of woman in our society and also to explore the theoretical framework of this research from Feminist perspective. This is to lay the foundation for the critical evaluation of NgoziChuma-Udeh’s *Echoes of a New Dawn* from the Feminist Perspective.

This study attempts an evaluation of how the female writer explores and projects the image of women as it relates to their life experiences of African. The study will reveal the culture of the African people with stress on the personality of their female folk. This enquiry will no doubt expose us to the sufferings, stands, and experiences of the African women among their male counterparts and their search for emancipation from their cultural subjugation.

Definition of the term image

Image is a visual representation of someone or something. According to *Merriam – Webster Dictionary* image “is a mental picture or impression of someone or something. A mental conception held in common by members of a group and symbolic of a basic concept. A popular conception (as of a person, institution, or nation) projected especially through the mass media”(677).

Cambridge Dictionary sees image as “the way that someone or something is thought of by other people” (1123). From the above background provided by these dictionaries, we can functionally define image as a view or idea conceived by one person about another. With respect to this study, the image of the African woman could be seen as the understanding of the personality of a woman from an African perspective. At this juncture, it is important to mention that in African societies, it is the men folk that creates and interprets the image of woman.

The above understanding will help us to evaluate the image of African woman as presented by both the male and female (writers). The image of women in African literature was largely the creation of the male writers; such as Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ngugi wa Thiong’ o, Ousmane Sembere, Wole Soyinka and so on. Their interest in African womanhood has taken a second place. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* for instance, all the women were being portrayed as being

of the weaker sex and subordinate beings to their men who order them around. In the novel, Okonkwo the hero shoots at one of his wives, Ekwefi just for the fact that his lunch is delayed.

It is not out of place that in male authored African novels, the image of women is valueless. The image of women as the collaborators of the serpent is a strong feature of African male authored texts such as Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Cypril Ekwensi's *Jaganana's Daughter*. Chuma-Udeh in her *Trends and Issues in Nigeria Literature* states that in male authored texts: "Women are derogatorily cast as the 'daughters of Eve' looking for the next man to feed an apple – a destructive apple that will end up hanging and choking at the man's throat" (209).

Also, women are represented as 'femme fatale' and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* serves, as an apt example of this. Ihuoma, the heroine is portrayed as an archetype of a strange and mysterious African woman who is a victim of a supernatural fate. Elechi's heroine, Ihuoma, was predestined to be kept as concubine; she is not to be married to any man because, unknown to her, the sea-god had married her in the spiritual world. This means that any man who wishes to marry her in the physical world must die. So one can simply say that Ihuoma, endowed with enchanting beauty, is sent to the world to captivate and tantalize men who desire to marry her into destruction as painted by the novelist, Elechi Amadi. He goes further to say that: "There are few women like that in the world... it is death to marry them and they leave behind a harrowing string of dead husbands" (196).

This same mythology of African women runs through most of African male writers' novels. These novelists seem to have no much regard for womanhood. In their writings women are subsumed, subjugated and relegated to the background by men. They see African women largely in their fecundity and subordinated to men. It is because of this representation of African women that feminism and female self assertion came into existence to attempt to correct this poor representation. Modern African female writers like Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Chuma-Udeh Ngozi, Mariama Ba, Ifeoma Okoye among others have presented a very different picture of women in their societies to that of the men have. Like their male counterparts, African women authors have written about traditions and the upheaval caused by colonialism and urbanization. But they have also shown the problems that traditions pose for women. For example, in these novels, *Echoes of a New Dawn* and *Children of the Eagle*, Chuma- Udeh and Adimora-Ezeigbo portray small Igbo communities, Ibonse and Umuga respectively much like the one represented by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. While Achebe centres his plot on the conflict caused by British colonization with a respect to men alone, Chuma- UdehNgozifocuses on the conflict within their community itself, particularly on the difficulties faced by widows, barren women, women as a sex tools that are passed from one man to another and so on. At the end, the writer tries to create a stance for women emancipation and liberation. Several feminist novels like *So Long a Letter*, *Efuru*, *Behind the Clouds*,

The Joys of Motherhood among others also explore similar themes.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens through which we engage this study is Feminism which yields itself to various shades of meanings and definition by both men and women. To most critics of African Literature, Feminism is a movement that explores the traumatic experiences of women, emotional strength, weakness and dignity of women. It seeks to arouse the consciousness of the women folk to their deprivation, marginalization, dehumanization and such other pejoratives which have been imposed on them by the African patriarchal society. With feminism, women metamorphosed from subservient and timid figures to assertive and individualistic ones that demand to be heard. This perhaps informs Barbara Christian's view of feminism as "women's struggle to become all that they can be" (21).

According to Rose Acholonu, feminism is "... a counterforce to the age-long tradition of the Ideology of female inferiority and subordination ...Is essentially concerned with claiming justice and humanity for women" (55). Filomina Steady sees feminism as "an abnegation of male protection and a (female) determination to be resourceful and self-reliant" (35). Obviously, in support of the aforementioned standpoint of Filomina Steady, Helen Chukwuma opines that: "Feminism is

based on the theory of individuality, recognition of personhood of women and equal opportunities for their development” (ix). She further contends that “Feminism is a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition, which seeks to give the woman a sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human beings” (3).She concludes by saying that the “Feminism is a reaction to the stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity”(10).

Rose Acholonu on a more radical note, states that, “Central to the philosophy of feminism is the quest for a complete overthrow of patriarchy and all it stands for – male supremacy and female subjugation...” (55).To Charles Nnolim, “feminism is more or less a disorder, a deviation, an extremism associated with misguided, frustrated and disgruntled women”(248).This stand is based on the premise that the so –called feminists are not even united in their quest for self actualization. Thus, it is not surprising that some women prefer being referred to as “womanists or advocates of feminism”. He concludes that “As long as women still strive to those traps of patriarchy as marriage, a home, children, etc, all the fights for total equality will remain in that realm of shadow boxing” (248).

Adimora –Ezeigbo argues that “Despite its noble goals... feminism conjured up vision of aggressive women who try to be like men, dress carelessly and abandon essential feminine attributes” (1).Probably in agreement, Chinweizu says that “feminism is a movement of bored matriarchs, frustrated tomboys and natural termagants” (118).The above observations,

in actual sense, reflect postulations by the various schools on what constitutes the stance of feminism.

Image of Women in Chuma-Udeh's *Echoes of a New Dawn*

The task of articulating a different voice, position and image for women in African literature has led to a new pattern of commitment in the Literature. This commitment has animated the creative talents of women writers. These female writers have moved the focus from a global perception of the African world as we see in the works of male writers, to a consideration of what Judith Lowder Newton has described as the “Ideology of the women’s sphere”. This is essentially one of the ways through which we can understand the function of literature to the society. Our concern here is to examine how this form of commitment manifests in Chuma-Udeh’s *Echoes of a New Dawn*. The novelist presents the fate of African woman in a traditional African society. The writer uses Lucia to tell the story of suppression and subjugation women face in their communities. Despite the fact that Lucia is not an African by way of birth but by marriage yet the traditional custom affects her and presents her with the fate that African women contend with.

Echoes of a New Dawn is a feminist orientated novel. In the novel, Chuma-Udeh moulds a fictional story of Caucasian woman who is married to Nigeria, in mourning she is held under the shackles of outdated customs and traditions. While her husband was alive, Lucia enjoyed every moment of their

togetherness. Her marriage was of blessing to her having produced a set twins; Emeka and Osita with their younger sister Adaora. Her husband was a professor, an educationist and herself a doctorate degree holder. Her family had every comfort of a modern home. The heroine Lucia never knew that beneath the beauty of the African life lay many outmoded rites and that maybe harmful and degrading to all human beings in general, but suppressive and obnoxious to the feminine gender in particular. When Lucia became a widow, she is faced with aspects of traditions that are very harmful to women. She experienced legion of inhuman treatment meted to her, she never imagined that such acts should be carried out not even in the animal kingdom.

Despite the writer's description of Lucia as the choice of a striking image—a white woman, a doctorate degree holder, once a professor's wife, the tradition does not consider her status and profiles in making her perform her widowhood rites for her late husband as enshrined in the culture of the people. Here the writer exposes the inescapable order suffered by any women that is in any way related to Africa.

Chuma-Udeh shows how frightened her Lucia is as the mourning rites of her husband begin to unfold. The most awful part of all is that it seems to be no room for escape from the horrid predicament Lucia finds herself. In the words of the writer, "She was not given an inch to react or even express herself. There was no need for that. She must not be heard, for she had no opinion to express, she was a woman sitting in ashes"

(3).

171

Here, the writer portrays a clear position of the women folk in African society. They are usually neglected as their opinions are never sought for before decisions are taken, even in the matters that directly affect them. Chuma-Udeh's Lucia has no say in this case even though the deceased was actually her own husband and by right her own decision ought to be paramount but Africa society says no to such.

For two weeks since the death of her husband, Lucia is made to sit on a mound of ashes covered with a thin hand woven mat in a hut away from the comfort of her home. She has been denied of her toiletries and not allowed to take any bath. The narrator paints her critical and smelly situation in a mourning hut, filled with ashes thus:

A strong smell of decay rose up occasionally from her inner most soul to torment her. Her breathing brought forth the putrid decay of an unwashed mouth, a two weeks' decay, which regurgitated as breathing mixed with the rancid odour of unwashed body and a very riotous abused system. It is unbelievable but she has been denied her toiletries for two weeks! (6-7).

It is indeed a very "riotous abused system". The writer brings this out to show the fate of thousands of African women suffering and dying in the guise of tradition and custom. This is obviously, the picture of some women in African societies as they struggle to break the chains of culture and tradition that dehumanized them. In their situation, there seem to be no helps, no comfort and no succour just as in Lucia's case. It is unfortunate aspect of the tradition that makes the narrator to cry

to the world and expects a positive reaction that will give way to a new dawn of freedom, liberty, peace, emancipation and empowerment for women in general.

Chuma-Udeh does not fail to record the matriarchy tendencies in African society. She does that through the activities of Umuada. Lucia's encounter with Umuada (daughters of the family) is a very horrible one. Through them, the writer paints a painful picture of intimidation on a woman by her fellow women. They toss and turn her to their will and took turns in guarding her hut. To the writer, the Umuada looked more like members of a powerful cult"(5). Ngozi Chumu-Udeh sees Lucia as "a fiddle stick to be used anyhow by these dreadful women" (5). With every passing minute, she will be filled with fear of every stage of the mourning rites in the name of tradition. The rites and customs are all a negation of the law of civilization and the dignity of women. This type of vice is what the writer wishes to correct, a widow should be protected not to be victimized by the society especially by fellow women.

Lucia knows nothing about this aspect of the culture that reduces a woman to a living dead. The little she learnt about African did not help her prepare in anyway for this dehumanized way of morning. She learnt a lot during her honeymoon, especially when her husband took her to Gobaret Minaret at Katsina where they met Prince Abdul, acclaim lucid prince of the Dutse kingdom who was a colleague of Nez at the university. Here, narrator uses Prince Abdul to explain to Lucia another aspect of African culture that marginalize women, this time Northern part of Nigerian culture. Chuma-Udeh x-rays the

barbaric norms against women in Islamic religion. Lucia learnt about Purdah- where a woman is kept in seclusion and not allowed to see anyone especially men, with *Bashiga* written on the door leading to her room. Prince Abduls explains to Lucia what *Bashiga* means: “It means no entry” (28). It is a notice written to ward off wandering legs from the abode of women in purdah. Lucia just could not believe it. In fact to her, this seems impossible but Prince Abdul explains further:

It is the culture, Madam. The woman grows up in a society and the society modulates her way of life, even her love life. 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 the case of adultery, the woman is summarily condemned to death by stoning because her act is a defilement of nature (29).

Lucia feels so bitter about this perceptible subjugation of the women folk. She wonders about it all and ask so many questions as “why should the society be so much against woman? Why should women be at the receiving end? Why punish only the women?”(29). To Lucia, It is unjust because the lecherous man is set free to look for another victim.

These questions carry with them, the writer’s feministic instincts. It reveals to the society what women are passing through without voicing them out. They feel that their decision and general well being are neglected by the society. That is why Chuma-Udeh and her likes take it upon themselves to be the

voices of these women. Chuma-Udeh, as a feminist, feels for her fellow women as she says: “Deep down in the hearts of these women, there must be unvoiced displeasure born out of frustration gnawing at their souls” (30).

Also Chuma-Udeh throws more light on this incomprehensible African culture where women are circumcised. Female circumcision, of course is carried out in some African communities. Chuma-Udeh frowns at this and through Lucia says “it is primitive and unhealthy and poses a lot of health hazards for the women” (33). Lucia is provoked about all these traditions that negates the woman person without knowing that her husband’s people have their own customs and traditional rites that negates a woman especially the windows.

The widowhood rites of Ibonse people are so horrible and terrifying that parents do not allow their daughters to marry from their place. No mother wishes her daughter to face these horrible mourning rites and so refuse any man from the village who wishes to marry their daughter. Chuma-Udeh uses Prof. Nez and Celia’s case as a very good example. Celia’s mother refuses Prof. Nez Neziyana marrying her daughter because of these widowhood rites. Nkechi pleaded on his brother’s behalf but all to no avail. Celia’s mother is very clear about her refusal in the marriage as she tells Nkechi thus: “My daughter our tradition is terrible. The yoke of the widowhood rites is a nightmare no woman wants to witness. We who are married into this village live in daily fear of it...”(68). At the end of their conversation, Nkechi finds herself wrapped by the stark reality, which the woman has laid bare before her. The writer also recalls that

Nkechi herself rejects many eligible men from their village that seek for her hand in marriage due to the said horrible mourning rites. The issue that made these women to reject marriage from their village is what Lucia is facing and she is not finding it easy.

Nkechi clears Lucia's stand as a widow as she goes further to summarize to her the do's and don'ts of widows thus: "Please stop looking at people, keep your eyes down, you are not supposed to look a man straight in the face. You are not supposed to talk, laugh, or interact with anybody (49)". Here, the writer shows that Lucia is really estranged (literally) from the rest of the world for no other crime other than just being a woman, a widow at that.

The worst of these traditions is that of the elder brother of the deceased inheriting the wife and all the properties of the deceased. Diokpa Obu, an old dirty, illiterate man warms up for Lucia's hand in marriage in fulfillment of this aspect of tradition. He bullishly waits for the mourning period to be over in order to take home his new treasure. Here, Chuma-Udeh shows that this tradition and custom regards women as nothing but mere objects to be passed from one hand to the other for the gratification of men's sexual pleasure. That is the fate of Lucia as DiokpaObu waits with burning desires for the day he will ascend her bed and make her his. DiokpaObu's gratitude is for the customs and traditions that make it so- the inheritance of the brother's wife.

As the novel progresses, Lucia can no longer stand the whole drama of the hard and wicked treatment that she is made

to undergo and which gets worse with each successive day. Already she has suffered enough and has been made to barb her hair. She is determined to stop everything and shun the tradition that has held her captive since the death of her husband.

Lucia believes that she can break the shackles of victimhood imposed on her by the society. She wants to know the stance of her sister-in law, Nkechi, in this her predicament by so doing she will decide on her way forward. She then inquires from Nkechi as she asks her thus, “Nkechi, ...are you for me or are you against me?”(50).The question puts Nkechi off balance but deep down in her heart, she feels for Lucia, for her dead brother, for her family lineage. She answers thus:

I am for you, Lucia, you don't seem to understand it, but we are in this together. I am the eldest daughter and the only surviving member of my father's immediate family and should anything go wrong... we are in this together. We survive or sink together too... We are all in one way or the other crippled and maimed by tradition. (50-51)

“We are all in one way or the other crippled and maimed by tradition”, (51). This indeed recalls the writer's mind about Nkechi's status. This is to say, that the writer does not fail to record the ordeal of Nkechi, who was sent out of her husband's house due to her inability to produce children. Nkechi has really been crippled and maimed by tradition as the writer recounts Nkechi's experience thus:

Nkechi never had a family of her own. She was sent packing from her husband's home in a neighboring village for her inability to have a child. Lucia wondered greatly at

this society's way of life. It used to be bizarre to her that the society should be unkind to a barren woman who needed support and encouragement. Nkechi's story was a pathetic one. Six years into her childless marriage, her husband simply brought home a woman and two children whom he claims to be his. One of the kids was about four years then, which was an indication that barely two years after their wedding; he had already kept the women outside his home (77-78).

In the extract above, Chuma-Udeh shows another aspect of victimization of the women folk. The writer shows that in most African societies,(the issue of childlessness is projected as the fault of a woman). The case of childlessness is always seen as the fault of the woman, even when this may not be true scientifically. It seems that in African societies, everyone has forgotten that a man can be sterile or infertile, or even be outright impotent. This shows that in marriage, African women do not fare any better. It is also seen in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The heroine, Nnuego is sent packaging from her first husband's house due to her inability to give him a child. This particular treatment has been the fate of women in most traditional African societies. The writer wishes that the society should revisit this issue (childlessness) to assert the proper cause or the person that is infertile (which could be either male or female) before apportioning blame to a woman person. Chuma-Udeh is also of the view that walls will not fall if a marriage does not work out; she even goes as far as making Nkechi to live in affluence in her father's house adding to her

178

luxury a car and a good job to the envy of her husband who later wants her back believing that Nkechi is now “an asset to him” (80)

Nkechi has been a source of encouragement to her sister-in-law throughout her predicament. True to her (Nkechi’s) words, they are in it together. Since Lucia’s widowhood, Nkechi has been making some of the harder traditional rites mild for her without the knowledge of *Umuada*. For instance, the traditional of Ibonse demands that Lucia should bath with the water used in bathing the corpse of her husband.

Nkechi, without the knowledge of anybody except that of Lucia arranged for her very clean water in place of that used to wash her husband’s corpse. Another instance is when Lucia is supposed to stay awake with only the corpse of her husband locked inside with her, but Nkechi secretly makes provision for other family members of Chris Nze Neziyanya joined Lucia in the darkroom convincing the villagers that Lucia actually performed that rite alone. Nkechi is actually trying to save a bad situation knowing that should Lucia decides to leave the country with her children that will be the end of her father’s lineage.

So Nkechi strives to support her late brother’s wife in her fight for liberation in order to keep her family lineage. Here, the writer brings to fore the need for the women folk to unite in their fight for the general liberations of womanhood. Hopeful enough, she believes that together they shall conquer and be allowed a chance to live a normal life. The writer sees it as a fight of unity and she puts it thus:

Yes...together they shall fight this epoch making war. But who had ever grappled with the dictates of the tradition in the annals of history? Well history must be made with an event piloted by someone, somewhere. They would either win or sink together. Whichever way the wind might blow, for good or for bad. Let it blow. It is not her sister-in-law's fight alone... (75)

The writer shows how hard a fight it is for Lucia not to stand alone on this fight, then she curves Nkechi to stand for her in whatever stance she might take against this dehumanizing tradition.

The writer also curves another woman out, who also assists in fighting for general liberation of her fellow women. Celia's mother, being an old woman had for long detested the ludicrous cultural oppressions meted on women by Ibonse people. So she helps a great deal by educating; and informing Nkechi and Lucia on the necessary steps to take in order to overcome this unacceptable cultural practice that suppresses women. She goes as far as planting her grandson, Ifedi, near them (Nkechi & Lucia) in case they needed his assistance. She does that because she finds out that Ifedi had once been used by these women to avert (prevent) Lucia from bathing with the water used in washing the corpse of her husband. Celia's mother really wishes for a change from the culture that prevents her daughter from marrying from their town, Ibonse, thus Celia's death. Lucia seeing her efforts and contributions prays for her thus: "May God keep her to witness the change she was engineering in the society of her time" (222).

The writer is persistent in her cry for a change of retrogressive culture – a culture that allows a woman to keep awake with the corpse of her husband, a culture that demands a woman to bath with the water that is used in washing the corpse of her husband, a culture that allows a woman 's hair to be shaved without her consent.

All these are done to a woman in the event of the death of her husband, but no one subjects the man through a similar experience when he loses his spouse. In the event of the death of a woman the husband goes about during the funeral dictating the peace of the burial. No one ever points accusing fingers at him over the death of his wife, neither is his freedom hindered by any means. He has no order to swear to and no special form of ritual or cleansing to undergo following the death of his wife. The man is as free even so free to choose another wife even during the burial. Oh, what a partial society! Hence, the writer advocates for a change.

In spite of all her subjugation Lucia is determined not to run away. Of course, she cannot allow herself to be inherited by the so called Diokpa Obu, which is possible only after the *Ikwa Ajadu* rite. Neither will she allow the said DiokpaObu to inherit her late husband properties. So she is determined to fight till the very end. Diplomacy is her only way out.

Chuma-Udeh's handling of Lucia's situation not only reveals her maturity in her treatment of her theme but also manifests her remarkable growth as a novelist. She makes all the necessary moves to liberate Lucia from the shackles of tradition that holds her captive.

Lucia had to meet other women who had passed through the *Ikwa Ajadu* rites to intimate her on their experience because she does not want to be taken unaware again. However, most of them are wallowing in fear and humiliation and do not want to talk about it. According to the writer, “they come out of it too traumatized” (106).

Eventually, Lucia is able to convince the three she met to intimate her on their experience. They are Christians and two of the three (the Ike sisters) lived in the mission. The ugly traditional rites turn most women into maniacs and Lucia, no doubt, saw the evidence of their experiences on meeting them. Anita summons up courage to her ordeal thus:

Then to my honor, they began to take off my clothing. I tried to ward them off with my legs, for my hands were tied behind me, but the chief priest looked so menacingly at me and warned... 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 uses his hands to smear the eggs into every orifice in my body. (196)

The writer is so blunt in her portrayal of the humiliation meted to a woman person in this rather bizarre manner. Through the story of Anita the writer portrays what exactly the woman passes through in the hands of chief *Aja – ani* and his cohorts during the *Ikwa – Ajadurite*. The writer shows that these women are tortured, abused and raped. Anita continues her story:

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 flowed from my eyes... I started retching again but the vomit could not flow out because my mouth was gagged. I was being suffocated... Then, they took hold of my legs and forcefully tore them apart... The chief priest and the dwarfs began to take their turns on me in that position. (197)

The result of the above engagement is Anita's birth to a dwarf. Ike's sister also told her own story. How she was made to swear stark naked in the presence of the elders in a shrine just to prove her innocence. As if that is not enough, they brought the corpse of a man and forced her to carry the casket containing the already decaying corpse on her head and walk round the village. She was even made to drink the water got from the man's decomposing corpse. She actually kept wake with the corpse after which it was observed that the man was not her husband but nobody listened to her. One week later a friend of her husband came to affirm that her husband was not dead. The villagers fled when they found out truly that her husband was not dead, that they had punished her out of wickedness.

With the above stories, one sees that the texture of the novel creates lasting impression in the mind of the reader(s). It makes the reader to wonder about the fate of women in a traditional African society. Lucia also wonders whether the custodian of this dehumanizing customs are really human, as the writer succinctly puts it:

Lucia wonders why a society should indulge in such uncivilized, barbaric and cannibalistic rituals in this modern time when the world was almost becoming a global village...Why should someone, a human person with a right to life and liberty be subjected to such inhuman treatment? How and why had the women of this society over the years accepted such fate as this? How have they managed to survive through it all? Why should a group of people scorn their women to the extent of reducing them to something lesser than animals? (5).

The novelist exposes the oppressive cultural traditions and social norms to the public and there-by draws local and international attention to the problems that women face whenever their husbands die. It is her wish that this obnoxious cultural tradition against women should be obliterated from the society. The writer believes that “traditions are made by human beings” (110), and therefore are subject to amendment.

However, Lucia having known all about IkwaAjadu and its adverse effects on the lives of people that have experienced it, decides to put an end to it. She is determined to break this very tradition and liberate herself and other African women from this dehumanizing treatment with the support of Nkechi her sister-in-law and her children. Lucia is able to carry out an act which puts a stop to the torture and the so called mourning rites meted on her. She does that by doing that which the community considered an abomination. The writer recalls it thus: “She deftly picked up a shovel from heavens knows where and

proceeded to shove heaps of sand into the grave. Time stood still! Abomination! Abomination of the highest order!!!(232).

Her action is of great magnitude for it has never be heard of that a woman near her husband's grave, not to imagine her pouring sand into the grave. This very action spoils the plan of Diokpa Obu who already has been hatching a plan and warming himself up on how to inherit Lucia after the *Ikwa Ajadu* rite and also that of the Chief Priest of *Aja-ani* who await to sexually abuse and enjoy Lucia during *Ikwa Ajadu* rite. Seeing that their plans have failed, they make to stop Lucia, but unfortunately both of them fell into the grave and Lucia simply continued in her act of shoving heaps of sand into the grave. The two evil culprits were absolutely humiliated and no one ever went near them because according to their custom. They had turned to the living dead since the red mud had touched them. The penalty for this engagement is excommunication Lucia and her family will be ex-communicated from the community because she has 'buried' the Chief Priest and Diokpa Obu alive. The action makes all the villagers to desert Lucia's compound without looking back thus giving way to the emergence of another set of people. As the writers succinctly puts it: "it was like an old order giving place to the new; it was the dawn of a new order" (238). By pushing Diokpa Obu and the Chief Priest of *Aja-ani* into the grave and pouring red sand on them, Lucia succeeds in destroying "an age long tradition" (237) that oppressed her fellow women for long.

Conclusion

The novel, *Echoes of a New Dawn* is one that cries for change, change from all the obnoxious cultural practices and norms that reduce women to carcasses. Her exposure of all these evil acts on woman is for the society to make amend by recognizing that women persons are as important as men because both are human beings. Chuma-Udeh uses her heroine, Lucia to educate African woman to re-examine their position in their suffering and find a way to redress it in order to survive. The novelist believes that “change will come” (70), and that it is in women’s hands to liberate themselves. She wishes for a society that will be rational in their treatment of both male and females. In the text, *Echoes of a New Dawn* the writer portrays the actual image of the woman person in an African society. Through her work, she paints pictures of the oppression, marginalization and subjugation of African women in tradition and cultural practices such as widowhood rites, childlessness, marriage right of women, and sexual molestation among others.

References

Acholonu, Catherine. (1995). *Motherism, the Afro- Centric Alternative to Feminism*. Owerri, Afa Publications.

----. (1998). “Myth, History, Culture and Igbo Womanhood in Flora Nwapa’s Novels”. *Emerging Perspectives on Flora*

Nwapa, Ed. Marie Umeh. Trenton; N.J: World Press.

Cambridge International Dictionary of English. (2003).U.K: Cambridge University Press.

Chinweizu et al. (1980). *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature, Vol.1*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.

----. (1990) *Anatomy of Female Power*. A Masculinist Dissection of matriarchy. Lagos: Pero.

Christian, Barbara. (1985). *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspective on Black Women Writers*: New York: Pergamon Press.

Chukwuma, Helen. (1989). Positivism and the Female Crisis in Nigeria. *Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*. Ed. H.C Ofokune- Macthouse Press Limited.

Chuma- Udeh, Ngozi. (2007). *Echoes of a New Dawn*. Onitsha: Malchjay Publishers.

----. (2007). *Trends and Issues in Nigeria Literature*. Nkpor: Base 5 Press Ltd.

Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Rowtledge.

Nnolim, Charles. (1994). "A House Divided" in Chukwuma Helen(Ed). *Feminisms in African Literature: Essay on Criticism*. Abaka: Belpot.

----. (1987). "Mythology and the Unhappy Woman in Nigeria Fiction" *Critical Theory and African Literature*. Ed. Ernest Emenyonu: Ibanda: Heinemann Publishers.

Oguzie, B.E.C.(2000). "New Female Voice in Social Criticism" *In Goatskin Bags and Wisdom*. Ed. Ernest Emenyonu. New Jersey: Africa World Press.

Obi, Gladys Nwakaego is a lecturer in the department of English, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Anambra State.