

Article original

Emancipation: Another Burden for some African Women in Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh*

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Article soumis le 02/02/2022 et accepté 06/05/2022

Abstract: This article intends to discuss emancipation as a noble feminist achievement for women but which unfortunately turns out to become another burden when misused by emancipated women. *Merchants of Flesh* presents, to readers, emancipated women who through some unethical practices dehumanize themselves and fellow women. Emancipation means therefore different things to different women for while some use it to efficiently contribute to human progress, other women in their search for emancipation fall into the trap of bad practices and behaviors. This essay shows how emancipation has become another burden for African women. The reader-oriented theory is used to achieve some expected results among which the misimplementation of women's rights and the alienation of women. The study is a textual analysis of the selected novel under consideration.

Keywords: alienation, burden, emancipation, feminism, unethical practices.

Résumé : Cet article a pour but de discuter l'émancipation en tant qu'un noble acquis féministe pour les femmes, mais qui s'avère malheureusement devenir un autre poids lorsqu'elle est mal utilisée par les femmes émancipées. *Merchants of Flesh* présente aux lecteurs des femmes émancipées qui, par des pratiques contraires à l'éthique, se déshumanisent et déshumanisent leurs semblables. L'émancipation n'a donc pas la même signification pour toutes les femmes, car si certaines l'utilisent pour contribuer efficacement au progrès humain, d'autres, dans leur quête

d'émancipation, tombent dans le piège des mauvaises pratiques et des mauvais comportements. Cet article montre comment l'émancipation est devenue un autre poids pour les femmes africaines. La théorie basée sur le lecteur est utilisée pour atteindre certains résultats attendus, parmi lesquels le mauvais usage des droits de la femme et l'aliénation des femmes. L'étude est une analyse textuelle du roman sélectionné.

Mots-clés : aliénation, poids, émancipation, féminisme, pratiques non éthiques

Introduction

Gender studies in African literature have revealed that women's rights and emancipation are major concerns of feminist struggle. Such feminist goals are, undeniably, noble. However, when the feminist ideology seems to have over-impacted some African women, it becomes a poison in the way some women enjoy their rights and emancipation. According to A. Pewissi (2017, p. 66) as quoted by K. Kpedzroku, feminist "struggle seems to poison the very existence of the society". This study is not against feminism but against its misuse by some emancipated women who put into question the dignity of human beings leading some women into unethical behaviors such as illegal abortion, excessive use of contraceptives, unfaithfulness, divorce that cause them to contaminate AIDS and other deadly diseases as portrayed in *Merchants of Flesh*. What is more, for the sake of money and financial freedom, some African women are mentioned in inhuman practices referred to as *porta potty* in Dubai. Emancipation as a woman's right therefore seems to be a new burden for African women. In the view of E. F. P. Calvin (2017, p.282), "the term 'emancipation' is often associated with the value of freedom. It implies freedom from legal, political or social restrictions". In tandem with this, he adds, "woman emancipation is inextricably linked to efforts or social schemes aimed at setting the women free from all types of bondage and sociopolitical and economic exploitation. It is a movement which aims at ensuring freedom of self-fulfillment and self-development for women". No doubt, such a

definition fits feminist' major ambitions for women. Thought to have been for a long time made voiceless and lacking possibilities for self-fulfillment, women have won great sympathy as there was a worldwide clarion call to save them in all spheres of human society. Consequently, writers of African literature have granted a special dedication to women in their literary productions. From a naive status, women have attained an emancipated position thanks to feminist movements and policies. It is a proven reality that women's conditions have changed and one may rejoice over the feminist achievements for women. However, seeing the way some women exaggeratedly misuse their right to emancipation is problematic. This movement toward emancipation has now reached a point where it becomes another burden and source of alienation for women.

While Z. Uhde (2017, p.390) in "From Women's Struggle to Distorted Emancipation" deals with a "Western late-modern capitalist society" to work out distorted forms of women's emancipation, my essay uses the fictional African women depicted in *Merchant of Flesh* as its raw material to demonstrate the influence they undergo as a result of globalizing advanced capitalism making them loose elementary virtues unique to African women. In the same light of women's emancipation, S. Karstedt (2000), discusses exaggeration and negative impacts in the process of female emancipation. In her work, she presents emancipation as an additional problem for German women. Is it not therefore interesting to probe from an African perspective what emancipation has become for African women? Interestingly enough, P. Mutume (2017) in his *Women's Emancipation in Africa – Reality or Illusion?* has warned that women's emancipation in Africa becomes a serious challenge. Elaborating on the issue of women's emancipation in her popular book *The Emancipation of Women: An African Perspective*, F. A. Dolphyne (1991) maintains that although discrimination against women is worldwide, she believes that because of differences in social, educational and cultural backgrounds, women have different perceptions of the meaning of

emancipation. This gives credence to my attempt to discuss emancipation as seen and implemented by women of *Merchants of Flesh* in their search to enjoy feminist freedom. In *Merchants of Flesh*, Ifeoma Chinwuba introduces her readership to emancipated women with inhuman attitudes that push readers question the freedom granted to women to free themselves from old social limitations and customs. *Merchants of Flesh* is replete with strong women willing “to gain their personal identity” (Murphy, Jr, 1995, p.96) through some unethical behaviors previously mentioned. F. Adler's (1975) *Sisters in crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal* is an overview analysis and a reassessment of the scope, depth, and implications of female crime. Crimes committed by some emancipated women are reminiscent of the scenes portrayed in *Merchants of Flesh* whereby police looks for and catches Madams involved in sexual crime against humanity. No doubt, female emancipation when misused becomes a poison for both females and males. Moreover, in their article « Human Trafficking and Gender in *Merchants of Flesh* », T. Adi and H. Anate (2018, p.177) observed that: « Women greatly dominate in the lucrative traffic of girls. Interestingly enough, gender-related issues attract the feminist reader's attention since Chinwuba exhibits women's violence against other women through girls' trafficking to the European sex-markets ». All these, I think are the immediate consequences of women's misuse of their emancipation as they seek by all means to gain a personal identity.

Through the lenses of the reader-oriented theory as seen by C. Bresler (2011, p.72), this article shows how women's emancipation as promoted by feminist struggles has become a serious burden for some African women as depicted by Ifeoma Chinwuba in *Merchants of Flesh*. For C. Bresler (2011, p.72), the reader and the text share a transactional experience. Therefore, is limited to thorough textual analysis of the selected novel. Extracts will be taken from the novel under consideration for interpretation and for proving emancipation as a new burden for African women.

1-Abortion: A Negative Expression of Female Freedom in *Merchants of Flesh*

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (2010, p.3), abortion "is the deliberate ending of a pregnancy at an early stage". In traditional Africa untouched by Western values, abortion was not known. At this time, miscarrying was even considered as the loss of a full human being. Unfortunately; with the rise of feminism and its ideology of empowering and emancipating women, abortion has become a free recurrent practice and a lucrative job because modern societies made of sexuality a play thing and a means for self-positioning for women. I do acknowledge that abortion can be allowed if the mother risks death and only if it were ethically oriented. The abortion depicted in *Merchants of Flesh* is used by women for lucrative goals based upon sexual trade.

Ifeoma Chinwuba makes an account of this homicide and the degradation of womanhood in *Merchants of Flesh*. The authoress is totally against her fellow women when they deliberately practice abortion. In *Merchants of Flesh*, instances are vividly offered to show how abortion is inhuman. Character Faith in the novel is very sorry for this alarming situation as she witnesses it as an attendant in a hospital where operations are regularly conducted. Under these conditions, she is aware of how the women candidates to abortion lose their dignity, but rather thinks it is a lucrative job because it brings much money to the physicians. She then yearns of getting such a job. "Now if only she (Faith) could learn how to do abortion safely. It was a lucrative business. Already she had assisted the medical director several times when he carried out abortions" (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.35). The narrator mentions that "abortion is a lucrative business" and the word "already" in the above extract shows how abundant abortion is in the hospital where Faith works. It follows from the above quotation that care practices, which have been a fundamental issue in women's emancipation struggles, are used nowadays for lucrative goals.

It is feminist view that women should be freed from all societal norms including biological achievements in order to remain always active for money and material accumulation. In the process, they forget the destructive and devaluating effect abortion has on them such. It constitutes a burden for women. In fact, Faith in the fulfilment of her duties has remarked that “most of the females’ private parts had an offense odour, between the smell of sweat, bleach and rotten egg. There usually was a blob of whitish mucus embedded in the folds of the labia majora. Vaginal infection, the Doctor said” (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.38). Because of the lack of sexual control, modern girls fall in unwanted pregnancies and are obliged to abort for fear of losing the possibilities of making money out of their body and sex or in the vision of pursuing their future ambitions. In the process, they are sexually infected and their sexual reproductive organs exposed to alarming risks. In these modern times, we are experiencing the freedom of sexuality and the right to abort and young emancipated ladies are victimised in their ways of schooling. From Faiths voice, we learn that:

There was a rumour in the clinic that the Doctor sometimes collected “tool” from the patients before evacuating the uterus. That special treatment was reserved for the young ladies who could not afford the full payment for the abortion. Sometimes the Doctor would collect from society ladies and university students too (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.39).

This extract shows how abortion is extended. To the present day, girls are the most offering group as far as abortion is concerned. In real life, we do experience such practices in our universities which have become places for sexual propaganda under the excuse of self-awareness or consciousness. What such depictions reveal is that, emancipated girls either in society or at university deviate from morality in the name of financial independence. In the parlance of C. F. Murphy Jr. (1995, p.15): “Financial independence was as indispensable to freedom as any other form of liberation”. Unfortunately, emancipated women go astray in

their perception of the financial independence they are endowed with. Ifeoma Chinwuba's view in *Merchants of Flesh* implies that abortion has become a means for her fictitious women to achieve their financial freedom. Because of abortion, an African woman may be deprived of her dignity and become useless to herself and to her society as well. As such, emancipation becomes a serious burden for women in *Merchants of Flesh*.

In the practice of abortion, men are not innocent at all. From *Merchants of Flesh*, readers are informed that: "There would always be women with unwanted pregnancies. As long as men pursued women for that little passage between their legs, there would always be termination of pregnancies. Each day in this hospital, one of the many in this city, an average of ten, eleven, twelve abortions were carried out" (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.39). With this rate on abortion, humanity is running to a down fall because the uncontrolled or misuse of women's rights. Through the writer's exposure of how women easily give themselves to unsafe practices, one can read moral decadence and women degradation as well as their dehumanisation.

Ifeoma Chinwuba's message through her exposition of abortion in fiction is that African women should avoid copying inhuman western values. For her readerships to get to know about the multiple consequences of abortion, Chinwuba made Faith observe that:

At times, Faith wondered how some women could be barren and in search of fruit of the womb in midst of so much terminations of gravida.

The Doctor had said that some of the barren women had no uterus, that sometime in their youth, they had probably gone to a quack doctor to procure an abortion. The ignorant fellow may have mistakenly removed both the unwanted foetus and the entire uterus. Such women, he said would never become pregnant (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.40).

In the light of this excerpt, it stands to reason that just for the simple desire to remain intact and available for sex or other lucrative opportunities of life, women abusively resort to abortion in illegal ways. What is more this passage traces the source of barrenness that becomes legion in African societies.

2-The Use of Contraceptives for Lucrative Goals in *Merchants of Flesh*

In modern times, sexuality has become a free option thanks to the introduction of contraceptives. Ethically used by other women for birth control, the fictitious women on *Merchants of Flesh* use it as an excellent method in their lucrative sexual traffic. These are ugly practices by women to achieve emancipation through financial freedom.

Nevertheless, in literature, some writers have started seeing the developing evil and have started making propaganda through their literary productions to reduce it. Ifeoma Chinwuba is a case in point. Through her novel *Merchants of Flesh* Chinwuba makes a depiction of all kind of women using excessively contraceptives for prostitution sake. This shows how thanks to contraceptives; ladies do not think twice before entering into sexuality. In *Merchants of Flesh*, sex is rather used for economic ends. The character Ufot observes that “sadly, it did not take much to bed a woman nowadays. In many places just a ‘Hello!’ or a bottle of Guinness and some chicken parts sufficed” (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.9). The rise of contraceptives has made it so. Ufot himself has slept with so many that he is even unable to count. Moral decay seems to become a virtue with women’s right to contraceptives. Again, my study is just against the negative use of these methods to help limiting the number of unwanted pregnancies which unfortunately are used for prostitution goals. Prostitution as presented in *Merchants of Flesh* would not have been so flourishing without the use of contraceptives. The use of condoms has enabled the madams to control their prostitutes as far as sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies are concerned. In the novel, the writer reveals that the Nigerian prostitutes in Italy were over

eleven thousand in number. Eleven thousand as a figure is deplorable and is shameful because it is only African ladies in a western land enslaved by their own sisters. This shows how contraceptives have negatively vulgarised sexuality in modern Africa. This is not so with traditional African women.

The so-called emancipated women suffer under the yoke of emancipation since it becomes an important burden for modern women depicted in the novel under study. In traditional Africa where contraceptives were not used, sexuality was duly respected. A reading of Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh* reveals the thesis that adhering blindly to western values of emancipating women through the feminist ideology leads Africa women to moral decline. Mostly, they do this to attain an emancipated social position. Prostitution is portrayed in the corpus text of this article as a lucrative business for women. This is possible through the misuse of contraceptives and the misunderstanding of emancipation as promoted by feminism. A good African woman knows the purpose of her sexual organs. Never does she use it for business sake as it is described in *Merchants of Flesh*. Ifeoma Chinwuba has been successful in representing the African woman as she is destroyed by her misuse and misunderstanding of the feminist ideology to emancipate and grant economic freedom to women. Contraceptives are introduced to readers of *Merchants of Flesh* as passports for sexuality. Everywhere along the streets they are exposed for free: "strong man take. They (prostitutes) pumped the air in his direction and amidst laughter stashed more condoms on his upturned palms. One passenger added a tube of spermicidal" (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.167). The extract reveals at which extent women are spoilt and exploited with consequences, as unfaithfulness and divorce.

3- Unfaithfulness, Divorce and AIDS in *Merchants of Flesh*

This section assesses facts from the corpus text under study related to unfaithfulness and divorce as other consequences of the misuse

of women's rights to contraceptives as portrayed in *Merchants of Flesh*.

In fact, with the rise of feminist ideology and its advocacy to liberate women from social constraints, a couple of rights and possibilities have been offered to women for the only goal to help them enjoy a secured marital life. Unfortunately, some women do exaggerate since they use methods as contraceptives for their sexual trade. Such unethical practices have reinforced unfaithfulness which results into divorce of couples in African societies. These are issues aptly fictionalized in Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh*. She thinks it is the result of the sexual luxuries that ladies go through while young and fresh in their search for money, for higher positions and for sexual pleasures. In *Merchants of Flesh*, Cynthia says: "Look at you. Do you think it is easy to marry and stay indoors after doing this kind of work? A girl who has been earning minimum of one million a night, to be getting a hundred thousand a week from her husband" (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.149). For economic ends, African women are eager to sacrifice their love relation just to cope with marital life as emancipated individuals in a hostile world to that principle. This is so because; they are trained to live in abundance without toiling. Again, the degree of sexuality they receive from their partners does not suffice them seeing the life of prostitute they did before getting married. The need for more urges them to go out of the marital union to sell their sex for money. Cynthia, one of Ifeoma Chinwuba's prostitutes informs her fellow comrades the hardship of getting attached to only one man after marriage. She thinks it will be really disturbing after such a great experience in sexuality. For this purpose, she declares:

Me, even if I marry a white man, I will still be going out for action once in a while. One man will be too boring now. I am used to many. Once I had twenty-seven or eight in one night! I could not walk to the bus stop afterwards. I had to lean on Rita. Then when I marry you expect me to stay at home looking at one man. Not me (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.150).

In the light of the above quotation as Cynthia declares, today some women under the hold of unethical practices of contraceptives and abortions could no longer be serious within their sexual relationships. They ran from one man to the other, married or unmarried ones and are sexually exploited only for the sake of being financed. This leads to instable marriages as remarked by Murphy, Jr. (1995, Pp.160-161):

The instabilities of modern marriage and the increase in divorce too often leads to a situation in which one parent, acting alone, must heroically bear all the parental responsibilities. These circumstances require utmost understanding, but they should not lead us to overlook the important links between procreation and mutual conjugal love. Nor should they lead us to ignore the significant benefits that come to any child who receives the positive and continuous influence of both of its parents.

From a close analysis of *Merchants of Flesh*, it resorts that some modern and emancipated African women have become raw materials for every working sector of activity. Men use them for their sexual satisfaction in turns without any guaranty of life. The central offers in this system of exploitation are money, promotion, job opportunities or materialism. In this sense, African women are ignorantly under multiple burdens. What is disturbing is that feminists always continue urging for emancipation which inflicts more hideous pains to African women. In this contemporary society, gender issues are experiencing the cold war of patriarchy under the influence of feminism. Discussing unfaithfulness, one may wonder if there are no male prostitutes. Unlike women prostitutes who are destroyed and deprived from their human dignity, male characters like Ufot and Ambassador Godson in *Merchants of Flesh* are intact and still yearn for new victims. This reinforces unfaithfulness and life becomes bitter and bitter for the African woman.

Apart from the above, unfaithfulness does otherwise considerably harm in the African societies. It is the source of sexually transmitted

diseases. In *Merchants of Flesh* ladies are suffering from sexual infections and many deaths are always announced due to AIDS. "The incidence of AIDS deaths among them is high. Almost every week, we receive medical reports of death of our citizens from different Italian hospitals. The usual cause is AIDS complications" (*Merchants of Flesh*, p.170). The alarming remark is that we never consider unfaithfulness as being the source of the constant deaths. We rather advise the use of contraceptive methods which are reinforcing unfaithfulness. Because of the trust we have in these western tools, the ladies blindly offer themselves to anybody for sexual intercourse. Above all, the direct result of unfaithfulness is divorce and deadly transmitted diseases which is currently a great problem in African societies. It is therefore time to revisit the rate of exaggeration in women's mismanagement of their rights and emancipation.

Conclusion

This essay's major concern has been to discuss emancipation as a burden for African women. It has exposed deviations in the way some African women enjoy their rights to emancipation. It is my contention that feminism has achieved many rights for women but these are simply misused and misimplemented by some modern women through unethical behaviors and practices. Far from being against Feminism itself, my article reveals deviations by women in the implementation of the rights won by feminists for them. I found therefore that, this miss implementation constitutes another burden and means of alienation for women. It is then sustainable to hold the point that in the fulfilment of feminists' assigned roles, women become sometimes the root of other women's oppression. Most importantly, I discovered that in the name of emancipation, emancipated women resort to some unethical behaviors such as abortion, the excessive use of contraceptives, unfaithfulness and divorce that cause them to contaminate AIDS and other deadly diseases for the sake of money and financial independence. This results into moral decadence and women degradation as well as their dehumanisation. Taken either from its radical or its

moderated form, the misuse of feminism and some of the rights it grants women turns to be another burden for African women. I humbly recommend that more responsible decisions should be taken by governmental institutions to limit the spreading of contraceptives and abortions with the vision to reduce women's exploitation for the rebirth of morality in African countries. In a situation where the emancipation of some groups of women solidifies women's burdens, we need to moderate and rethink the way some women make use of their rights and freedom.

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