

Images of Women as a Slave in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*

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Abstract

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta is Africa's most prolific female writer. Emecheta novels portray the life of women and their struggle to succeed in an exploitative male dominated traditional Nigerian society. Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1977) explores the concept of enslavement. There is a clear message in the novel, which refers to the permanent slave condition of women in Nigeria. This paper focus on the novel deals with how women are treated as slaves and mistreat. How women exploited and oppressed by the male dominated society and their own parents. Through, the portrait of Ogbanje Ojebeta, the heroine of the novel Emecheta portrays slavery. Ojebeta who was sold into slavery by his own brother in need of money to serve his own selfish needs. However, her time as a slave, despite the hard work and sometimes-harsh treatment, is a period of great personal development. As women are not allowed to decide their own future. Ojebeta shaves her head in order to escape the possibility of enforced marriage. She too asserts her freedom in the choice of her marriage partner. Emecheta points out that for women marriage is slavery. Even out of slavery, the fate of Ojebeta remains the same. In Ojebeta lifetime Ojebeta Journeys from one form of slavery into another as she plays in turn the role of daughter, sister and housemaid or rather niece, lover, wife roles which insistently subordinate her to men.

Introduction

The African world is still a very male dominated world, and female authors who dare to speak out about the condition of women in Africa have a tough, uphill road ahead of them. Women in male authored books do not occupy centre stage. They usually play secondary roles. They are just background figures. Women's Writing always questioned male constructs like marriage and family. Women are seen and presented from male point of view and from the view of social morality.

The African novel presents different images of women in the contemporary patriarchal society. African women writers of first generation like Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa have focused on the marginalized position of women and need to revolt against exploitation and oppression of women in African society.

West African women writers are concerned with the protest against for discrimination and woman's oppression in patriarchal society. Their writings present the realistic picture of the sufferings of women. They sympathize with the plight of women and denounce their meek submission in male-oriented society. They have often challenged some of the fundamental assumptions of cultural norms. By presenting woman as a victim of circumstances created by the society, they seem to have established that woman is not just a commodity to inherit or enjoy but an individual with emotions and desires and ambition and drive in her to advance in life.

The term slave has its origins in the word Slav. Slavery can broadly be described as the ownership, buying and selling of human beings for the purpose of forced and unpaid labour. In Africa many societies recognized slaves merely as property, but others see them as dependents who eventually might be integrated into the families of slave owners. Traditionally African slaves are bought to perform menial or domestic labour, to serve as wives or concubines and in many societies these women stood as symbols of male wealth. Sometimes slaves are sexually abused by their owners. In many African societies even children are sold as slaves.

Buchi Emecheta is Africa's most prolific female writer, who has written novels, children's books, plays and non-fiction. She is best known for novels which include **In the Ditch (1972)**, **Second Class Citizen (1974)**, **The Brideprice (1976)**, **The Slave Girl (1977)**, **The Joys of Motherhood (1979)**, **Destination Birfra (1982)** and **Kehinde (1994)**. Her strong themes of child slavery, motherhood, female independence and freedom through education have won her considerable critical acclaim and honorary awards. In an interview with Julie Homles, Emecheta says: "If I was not to perish here, I realized that I find something I was good at my books are about survival, just like my own life." (The voice).

Emecheta has presented women in different roles in both the traditional and immigrant societies. Like Achebe she too is greatly concerned about the Igbo Culture. To her Igbo is an emotional tongue full of proverbs and saying reflecting ancestral wisdom. She is conscious of black woman's awareness of racial and gender discrimination Buchi Emecheta has been disowned by several African male authors and critics for being too bold in her portrayal of women character in her novels. In this respect she challenges the point of view of her compatriot, Chinua Achebe, in whose novels African history and traditions are celebrated but women's issues are marginalized and the practice of polygamy, bride price and domestic violence are ignored. She has popularized African Women's issues in the west and carved out a space for black women with feminist fiction.

Buchi Emecheta's **The Slave Girl (1977)**, a novel whose manuscript is once burned by her former husband, received a Jack Campbell Award from Newstateman and she is selected as the Best Black British Writer in 1978. The Slave Girl depicts the limited opportunities and property

status of women in Nigerian Society. One of Emecheta's main themes involving slavery is the assertion that in Nigerian society, all women are enslaved to and by men. Ogbanje Ojebeta is the heroine of the novel. Her parents suddenly die of "felenze". At the age of seven Ojebeta becomes an orphan. Ojebeta's brother Okolie decides to sell her because he needs money to purchase scarves, anklets and beads for his coming-of-age dance costume. Okolie sells Ojebeta to a distant relative, a wealthy trader named Ma Palagada who lives far away from Ibuza in Onitsha and gets Eight English pounds. He sacrifices her childhood by selling her into slavery. In an instant, Ojebeta's future is no longer guided by heartfelt promises of love and attention but by insistent demands for labour and service. Ojebeta's childlike attributes contrast highly with the treatment she remains as a woman and a slave.

Ma Palagada is a well-to-do cloth seller in the large market town of Onitsha who already has two grown daughters (Victoria and Elizabeth), a son (Clifford), and two male slaves working her farm, and four other slave girls (Chiago, Amanna, Nwayinuzo, Ijeoma) working in Ma Palagada's market stall. When Okolie sells her into slavery, Ojebeta is still child. But she is given the work of an adult. Ojebeta's facial tattoos and charm visually symbolize her special individuality; yet other women in Eke market laugh at her because she appears strange. Her parents Okwuekwu Oda and Umeadi designated her as a special person. Both Ojebeta's parents' lavish love and attention on their precious daughter. Her father makes a long and Dangerous journey to Idu to purchase charms to protect her from the evil spirits. Her mother has elaborate, beautiful tattoos stenciled on her daughter's face. Ojebeta differs from others.

Ojebeta works as the other slaves do. She forms close bonds with a number of other slave girls and even Ma Palagada seems to a kind of foster mother to her at times. Ma Palagada is generally a figure of strength and power. She allows her slaves to learn to read and write. She gives them education, teaches them various skills. Ma Palagada is a benevolent slave master. She treats the slave girls as her own daughter. Ojebata is one of the most efficient slaves in Ma Palagada's house. Her son Clifford falls in love with her and she stops working hard as the other slaves do. She thinks that this is a way to get back the money spent to buy Ojebeta.

Ojebata helps Ma Palagada from a long-standing serious illness. Her daughter Victoria comes from Asaba along with her two younger children. The household atmosphere changes a lot because of Victoria's attitude and behavior. When Ma Palagada dies, Clifford becomes preoccupied with taking over the business. Her property, including the slaves, is divided up when Victoria urges Ojebeta for the first-time sniffing freedom throws caution to the wind shouts back at her. Ojebeta has vague memories of her past life in Ibuza. She decides to return to her homeland. Her own land welcomes her bride price.

When Ojebeta learns that a relative wishes to sell her for bride price, and resorts to the ancient practice of betrothal through the cutting of a lock of hair she cuts off her hair. She chooses to marry Jacob Okonji, a man from Ibuza. He could read and write. Despite the compensations of her life is she calls her husband her own master. She kneels before Jacob and confesses.

'I could not wish for a better master' (SG 184)

Emecheta has the last word in this novel.

‘Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters.’

Even out of slavery, the fate of Ojebeta remains the same. She changes one master for another.

In this novel like there is, another character is Chiago. She is one of the slaves in the Ma Palagada’s house and she is a big girl in the slave group. Chiago always concerned with Ojebeta because she is a parentless child. She is one of the secondary characters tells the heroine two things. The first one is how she witnesses the life burial of a slave girl. Emecheta presents the story of the live burial of a slave girl along with her dead mistress. The second one is men kidnap women to get money by selling them as slaves. There slaves could not escape from their masters. The run-away slaves are treated so badly that Chicago says, ‘ a slave who made an unsuccessful attempt to run away was better off dead’. The live burial of the futilely defiant slave girl symbolically expresses the plight of all Igbo women restricted by customs. The portrait of Ojebeta and live burial of the slave woman highlight the condition of women in the Igbo society as one of victimization and servitude.

Ma Palagada treats Ojebeta and the other slave girls in the Palagada household with kindness. But her husband Pa Palagada and her son Clifford ill-treat the slave children and sometimes even assaults them sexually. Chiago accepts everything because she never allows open her mouth to tell others. When Ma Palagada dies Palagada’s slave girls look forward with apprehension to the future. The oldest slave girl, Chiago marries Pa Palagada becomes head of the households and bears him four sons. In spite of her sufferings Chicago accepts her fate happily.

In the same way Amanna, one of the slave girl has been born a twin among people who rejected twins. Because in Africa twins consider brings the bad luck. And though her mother is managed to nurse her secretly for a while, the time has come when it is impossible to keep her any longer decided to sell. Her mother simply wants to given her a chance in life. Thus, sometimes it seems slavery can be used to save lives and help families to survive. When Ma Palagada dies, Amanna becomes a successful business owner. She has a big shop and a car.

Another character Nwayinuzo means ‘a girl found by the roadside’. Her work is from the back report and then feels it her duty to report what Amanna was telling Ojebeta. These actions watched Ma Palagada and enjoyed. She also is concerned about Ojebeta. At the end of the novel she marries another male slave Jienuka.

But whoever or whatever the enslaving power may be, Emecheta shows that the oppression of women is an invariable constant. The most woman can hope for is to be able to choose the least cruel available master. Buchi Emecheta see parallels between sexual and racial discrimination and parallels between young wives and slaves.

Emecheta through her images of slaves points out the good as well as bad in the system of African slavery. She throws light on the inhuman treatment met out the slaves. At the same time, she shows that there are good slave owners like Ma Palagada.

In the concluding part, Emecheta exposes the injustices and sufferings inflicted upon women by traditional customs and mores. Such customs are actually institutionalized forms of male oppression.

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