

Handcuffs of Slavery: A Study on Slavery in the Novel of Buchi Emecheta the Slave Girl

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Abstract

This paper explores the struggle of the slave girl through the theme of slavery in the novel of Buchi Emecheta *The Slave Girl*. It is about the study of the oppression of women by men. This novel has won The Jack Campbell New Statesman Award. It is a heartbreaking study of Ogbanje Ojebeta who lost her parents. She was sold into slavery by her brother. Though she positively releases herself from the captivity of the Palagada she is not entirely free. In Ibuza culture women cannot be free because of the traditions. She marries to Jacob, a master of her individual choice. At the conclusion she is accepted by her husband and thus switched hands from one custom of slavery into another. She wishes for freedom, the more deeply she is caught up into the tradition and finally offers up herself.

Buchi Emecheta is effective in offering the African womanhood from a woman's point of view. She describes her female characters in such a brave way that instead of accepting their doom, they fight to declare themselves against a multiple way of oppressions, there by challenging the African's approach towards women. In African Literature there are many famous writers. Among them Buchi Emecheta is popular for her novels. The novels are *The Bride Price*, *Joys of Motherhood*, *The Slave Girl*, *Second Class Citizen*, *The Rape of Shavi* etc. This Paper deals with the novel *The Slave Girl*. This novel makes a wide analysis of the women's struggles, male domination and also the slavery in the novel. Buchi Emecheta unite the slave girl's struggles in the society.

Emecheta's fourth novel *The Slave Girl* (1977) is definitely fixed in Igbo culture and tradition. This novel is a dramatized account of Emecheta's mother, Ogbanje Emecheta. She was traded into slavery by her brother for the price of a silk head tie which he needed for his cultural dance. It is a study on the subjugation of women by men. This novel gives an image of male domination along with the accurate state of slavery and makes *The Slave Girl* most visibly feministic of all of Emecheta's novel. Katherine Frank comments that, "It is in this book that Emecheta most fully explores her central vision of female bondage, her underlying metaphor of African womanhood as a condition of victimization and servitude".

In the novel, *The Slave Girl* Emecheta reflects the life of the protagonist, Ogbanje Ojebeta. The beginning appears to be greatly classic with the portrayal of the survival of a single female child. She is eagerly expected and felt more precious by her parents. In Ibuza culture, the joy of a daughter's birth is very unusual but Ojebeta's

parents celebrate her birth. According to the culture of Ibuza they celebrate the birth of a boy child not the girl child but here the situation was totally different. "Girl children were not normally particularly prized creatures, but Ojebeta's father had lost so many that they now assumed a quality of preciousness" (19). Ojebeta's loving parents show great affection and love on such on her. They love her so much by her father and in order to save her from being trapped by the spirits into the next world. He makes a long and risky journey to Idu to purchase ornaments and to protect her. Her mother made different designs of beautiful tattoos on her face. Such sympathies did not last long. They end shortly because of the death of her loving parents. Ogbanje Ojebeta become orphaned at the age of seven.

Okelie, Ojebeta's brother reasoning that 'After all, a girl needed men to guide her'. He trades her into slavery to an unfriendly relative and a prosperous trader named Ma Palagada. Ma Palagada, who previously owns five girls and two male slaves, lives far away in Onitsha. But Okelie's sex act explanations for export his sister is openly money-oriented, he finally clears his blame through the justification that, "Even if she was an only daughter, she was still only a daughter" (80). To Okelie his current want is of superior urgency than that of his sister, he trades her for eight pounds because he, "desperately needed whatever money came his way to prepare himself for his coming-of-age-dance ... to purchase strings of cowries and little bells ... large, colourful, ostrich features" (41). Ogbanje Ojebeta slowly accepts Ma Palagada's feudalistic treatment of her slave girls as her daughters. The slave girls are outfitted up on Sundays in nice church wears and take their seats at the back of the church. This makes them feel completely grateful to her and they thank her saying, "Thank you Ma for being so kind to us. May God make you prosper the More" (107).

In the novel *The Slave Girl* Emecheta clearly describes about the dehumanization and sexual harassment that are also connected with slavery. The Novelist depicts the disgust of the suppression through Chiago, the eldest slave girl when she recalls with fear, how Pa Palagada, "had insisted on her rubbing his back and cutting his nails, while he occasionally dipped his huge hands into her blouse. She had learned to stop protesting, to accept his attentions and be quite about it all" (93-94). The slave girls had to keep their mouth shut about the sexual harassment by their masters because they had nobody to help them. Even Ma Palagada who treats the slave girls as daughters, declines to interfere in such problems as mistreatment of the slave girls by her husband and son. Ojebeta is released from her enslavement only after the death of Ma Palagada.

When Ojebeta returns back to Ibuza she was joyfully and cordially welcomed by the natives. In a short period of the time he understands that she is projected and even more deeply stuck into the traditional way of life. As she is brought up in Onitsha, she is unprepared for the traditional life. She is frightened when she adapts the custom of, 'Any man could cut off a lock of hair from a girl's head and make her his wife forever'. As this is an officially allowed custom and as there was no chance to object it, she agrees to shave off every last vestige of hair on her head. Ogbanje understands that though her breakdowns the chains of slavery, she is not yet free. She was quiet a slave to the traditions and customs. Ojebeta decides to marry Jacob but her mutual father, uncle Eze objects her choice. He secretly plans to marry her to his cousin by practicing the custom of cutting off a hair lock of Ojebeta. Ojebeta and Jacob love each other. So they planned to elope, hence forth disobeying the Ibuza tradition.

Emecheta presents additional myth that occurs in the traditional Ibizaculture which states that the curse falls on those slaves who are not actually free until what was paid is repaid to their masters. That was the reason for Ogbanje starts to have miscarriages after having two children. Later, when Clifford, son of Ma Palagada, a one-time follower of Ogbanje, originates to take her as a slave, he gets shocked on seeing her, because, "Once a lively, intelligent girl, as now a nervous woman, with lustreless air... unsure of herself and her unbecoming outfit" (176-178). Ojebeta cheerfully accepts the reality of the myths of tradition and her husband, Jacob, thankfully pays off Clifford the amount for which she was first sold by her brother.

The extreme irony of Ojebeta's story is that, in spite of the recompenses of her life with the Palagada, she never agrees in her slavery with them but when she gladly chooses Jacob as the master of her own choice, she covers her doom. Likewise, Chiago is happy and opposes the cunning master Pa Palagada who marries her after the death of Ma Palagada, however Ojebeta wished for freedom all time and she is found just shifting the forms of suppression and not able to release herself. Emecheta concludes the novel with a bitterly ironic statement: "As Britain was emerging from war once more victorious, and claiming to have stopped the slavery which she had helped to spread in all her black colonies, Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters" (179).

The novel *The Slave Girl* centres on the study of the subjugation of women by men and it shows the sufferings of women by their slave masters. They experienced the oppression by men and found out the ways and they escaped from this enslavement. On the other hand they are caught up by the tradition of Ibuza. At the end of the novel, Jacob officially bought Ojebeta from Clifford and becomes her new master. Thus Ojebeta gets transferred from one form of slavery into another. The supreme satire of Ojebeta is that she bargains with her fate when she willingly chooses her master

Works Cited

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