

Ideological Ambiguities and Social Relevance in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*

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Abstract - Many African female writers react to social constraints to create their literary productions. In her novel *The Slave Girl*, Buchi Emecheta's main concern is women's experience in a patriarchal society; but her ideological stand on women's issues is not clear. Character delineation and plot construction are ambiguous as far as the writer's defence of women's cause is concerned. Emecheta is well-known for her commitment to the Feminist ideology which proclaims the liberation of women from patriarchal yokes. But making women enslave other women is problematic. What meaning can we draw from the fact that the slaves of Ma Palagada, a female character, are mainly little girls bought in complex situations by this rich woman?

This article investigates the ideological ambiguities in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* and the social relevance of some issues which organize the plot of this story.

Key words: Ideology, gender, ambiguity, Feminism, relationships.

Résumé - Beaucoup d'écrivains africains réagissent aux contraintes sociales dans leurs œuvres. Dans son ouvrage intitulé *The Slave Girl*, la majeure préoccupation de Buchi Emecheta est l'expérience féminine dans une société patriarcale ; mais la position idéologique de l'auteur n'est pas claire. Les personnages de même que la trame du roman sont ambigus en ce qui concerne la défense de la cause féminine par l'auteur. Emecheta est bien connue pour son engagement à l'idéologie féministe qui proclame la libération de la femme de la domination patriarcale. Mais, faire des femmes des prisonnières d'autres femmes est problématique. Quel sens peut-on avoir du fait que les esclaves de Ma Palagada, un personnage femme, sont surtout de petites filles achetées dans des situations complexes par celle-ci? Cet article se propose d'examiner les ambiguïtés idéologiques de même que les interconnexions avec les réalités sociales dans le roman *The Slave Girl* de Buchi Emecheta.

Mots clés : Idéologie, genre, ambiguïté, Féminisme, relations.

1. Introduction

Studies in gender identity have revealed that African female writers' literary productions have greatly attacked man as being responsible for women's plight in society. This ideological stand which draws on the feminist philosophy, sustains plot organization and character delineation in their novels. A central task of feminism has been to examine women's oppression and the possibilities for resistance and positive change. The logic behind this is to dismantle the master-slave or dominator-dominated relationships. For these women, man being the dominator, oppresses woman making her voiceless, incapable of progress and denies her self-fulfilment. What some theorists consider as biological essentialism is that woman is considered from birth as inferior to man. Because of this, it is considered that woman's biology is the source of her domination by man and society.

Separateness of masculine and feminine identity has been articulated differently in African literature basing on gender ideologies. While the great majority of pioneer male writers have portrayed the patriarchal organization of African society which denies woman all recognition in public affairs, making her voiceless and submissive, African female writers in their great majority stand against oppression based on gender ideologies. They consequently engage a collective fight against male chauvinism and launch a movement for the destruction of what Betty Friedan would

call “a feminine mystique¹” which makes woman a “second class citizen²”- to borrow Buchi Emecheta’s expression.

Female writers do not acknowledge the so-called supremacy of man, and advocate equal rights and opportunities for all. Thus the authority of man and his domination of woman in all sectors of life in society are considered by women as a crime against them, because this situation makes woman vulnerable. To justify this masculine domination of women, Buchi Emecheta produced her novel *The Slave Girl* (1977) which clearly shows the female protagonist Ogbanje Ojebeta’s life experience as a prison. The title of the novel is illustrative for this purpose.

The Slave Girl is a story about a female child Ogbanje Ojebeta and her brother Okolie who are both orphans. At birth, Ojebeta was to be made a slave to gods to avoid the tragic fate which always befell her mother’s children at birth. We are told:

The dibia was pleased with Okwuekwu’s perseverance. He sang some incantations over the charms made from copper pieces, and together with some cowries these were strung like beads and tied round each small arm of baby Ogbanje Ojebeta. So whenever she cried and moved her arms about, the metal bells would ring, the cowries would rumble, and her friends from the other world would run, for they had never seen anything like it before, not even in the land of the dead where they were said to live. Thus Ojebeta remained in the land of the living, with her mother Umeadi and her father Okwuekwu Oda, and her two brothers.(14)

But the bottom problem is: who makes the little girl a slave to gods? Her plight develops from tradition to her father Oda and her brother Okolie, and even later on, to her husband; but most importantly, there is Ma Palagada, a rich woman in the area who bought Ojebeta from childhood. This woman even dominates her husband: “... Pa Palagada was called a coward”(124). Ojebeta’s life has been worsened when she was sold to this rich woman by her brother Okolie who had no money to prepare his coming -of-age ceremony. From an ideological stand, Emecheta’s position here seems ambiguous and needs investigations.

The main point of this study is to analyse how Emecheta’s articulation women’s oppression makes her ideological position unclear.

2. Stretching the Horizons of a Self-definition and Individual Identities

In *The Slave Girl*, the writer adopts a strategy of identification in which characters’ development projects them into a combination of changes which either surprise them or change their lives drastically. Thus the logic of the text projects Ojebeta into a world whereby she has become the revelation of a social meaning of women’s fate. The narrator’s pain is visible: « Ojebeta the only living child of Umeadi cried out once more in despair, this time to her dead mother: ‘Save me, Mother, for now I am lost’»(55). From disillusionment to irony, the protagonists move through events in which they all have become victims. It is true that there is a network of interdependence which is the main factor of the situation in the story. This characteristic is very close to the womanist philosophy of complementarity.

¹ - Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York : Norton and Company, 1977).

² - Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* (Johannesbourg: Heineman,1994).

"Womanism" as ideology is a shade of Feminism which states that man and woman should entertain fruitful relationships for the well being of the whole community. For the improvement of the life condition of society, it believes that woman should be liberated from bondage and oppression wherever they come from. African American female critic Alice Walker coined the word as a black alternative to Feminism which has provoked fear and confusion among the black community because of its radical stance which threatens society from its roots³. In Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, the relationships between the individuals do not create favourable conditions for their fulfilment. They have rather destroyed many, and each of them suffered the pain of it. As for Ojebeta we are told:

Time is always said to be a great healer of wounds however deep they may be when fresh, and Ojebeta's case was no exception.
For days she cried silently, since the joy of letting others know your sorrows was denied the slaves like her. Nobody actually told her she must not talk about her past; circumstances simply made it impossible to do so or even to think about it...
She had soon learned to be up even before Jienueka ran her monstrous bell. (84)

As it appears, the changing realities of the life of the little girl will change her identity for the rest of her life. It is the same for the other slave girl Chiago who was impregnated by Pa Palagada, and who got married to him later after the death of Ma Palagada. PALAGADA is the name of the woman, and this was to become the husband's name also. This displays well Emecheta's role reversal strategy in this novel. The following extract shows this:

Ma Palagada was a very tall woman. So tall was she that people thought she was all legs. They said that when she dropped those legs in walking they went *palagada, palagada* like kolanut pods falling on dry leaves; and because of this onomatopoeic description of how she threw her long legs forward the explosive name "Palagada", which was not the name her parents have given her stuck. ...Even her last husband, who came from over the sea and spoke Ibo in a funny way, was known locally as Pa Palagada (66).

Clearly, this name Palagada is ironical, giving an ugly image to this woman whose defects are compensated by her economic power. Why Emecheta positions this female character in this delicate situation giving her this image is not clear. True that women are not angels according to female writers; but Ma Palagada plays a clearly negative role with the power which is vested on her by money. Women's economic dependence is one of the situations which submit them to male domination; and it is advocated by many feminist critics that women should fight to free themselves economically. It is known that matters and methods of Feminism are deeply entwined, but they mainly require virtue from women. "The virtuous woman"⁴ is one who displays stout and defensible moral values. Unfortunately, Ma Palagada shows the contrary. For Albert Mugambi Rutere in his book entitled *Women and Patriarchal Power in the Selected Novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*, there is

The importance for women to empower themselves through gender awareness, to network with and bond among themselves, and to collaborate with gender-sensitizing

³ -Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (London: The Women's Press) 1984.

⁴ -This is the title of a novel by a Nigerian female writer, Zaynab Alkali (Longman, 1986)

men, while simultaneously campaigning for legal and policy reforms that support women's advancement (...) and the welfare of society in general.(Rutere 38)

Women's disempowerment as we know, is the main cause of gender inequalities in many societies; and this can be attributed to limited access and control over productive resource, access to financial services, insufficient access to education, lack of skill, cultural impediments etc. In Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, Ma Palagada is the one who maintains little girls in this tragic dependence in her business in which they all lost their identities. But for Ojebeta, this loss of identity started from home; and it is possible to say here that even though superstitious beliefs are at the core of this matter, there is also culture and tradition which are part of a destiny which Ma Palagada worsened. We are told:

She felt humiliated when she saw a group of women with trays of cassava pulp on their head laughing and pointing at her direction; one of them, trying to be modest, was looking away to hide her laughter....(38)
It was not just because of Ojebeta's safety charms, the bells and cowrie shells that jingled when she made the slightest movement.... All over her features were traced intricate tattoos the patterns of spinach leaves, with delicate branches running down the bridge of her nose, spreading out on her forehead and ending up at the top of her ears....It was not that many Ibos would not have facial tribal marks of different kinds, rather that few would have put so many on the face of one little girl. (39)

This characteristic which oppresses Ojebeta in a different way, is clearly a blame to the parental practices made on her. The verdict of the writer on this practice is visible in the foregoing extract.

3. Violence and the Ideology of Silence

Chris Cuomo and Alison Bailey posit that

The systematic mistreatment and devaluation of females cross-culturally is pragmatic human harm with grave and pervasive consequences. ... With emancipation for women, will come widespread human improvement. Feminist philosophy is grounded in the premise that in patriarchal, sexist, or male-dominated contexts, women's wisdom on the matters that affect them is crucial. However, in such contexts, "woman" is seen as a diverse social category, not a universal experience or body type, because women in their interests are immeasurably diverse. (Bailey 1)

The situation into which Ma Palagada puts her slaves is not conducive for their self-fulfilment. The reader has the feeling that all her business is for individualistic purposes.

Human beings are greatly responsible for their fate. That is the reason why Ojebeta's selling does not give any satisfaction to her brother Okolie. As the narrator puts it,

Okolie mourned the loss of his sister for days. His was not the kind of mourning that he could share with anyone. Had Ojebeta simply died, relatives and friends would have consoled and sympathized with him. But this kind of loss burned his conscience.(77)

This psychological violence does not liberate the individual from his socioeconomic problems. Emecheta clearly provides instruments for the degradation of this male character. Here the writer's organisation of moral codes that should sustain all human behaviour is clear. Okolie's loss of dignity is what constitutes here

Emecheta's feminist position. By annihilating the human potential in this male character, Emecheta develops a triumphalism in an emerging power of woman. Elsewhere we are told about the same character:

...is there not a saying that there are those who are born to lead and those who are born to be led? Indeed Okoliehad the energy of three men. But he was not born to use all this. Okolie was one of those born to make excuses.
....Within a year he was in debt with his in-laws; he could not afford to pay the bride price of his wife; his wife did not conceive and people wondered why. She was becoming dry and thin and people knew that this was due to hunger. Okolie did not know what to do but put the blame on felenza, on his elder brother for going away and leaving him, and on his wife for running to him at all....(82)
In the end, he too sneaked away one night in search of a "white man's job" (83)

The segments of the narration reveal Okolie as a fugitive slave himself. Maybe this slavery is worse than the fate of Ojebeta in Ma Palagada's house. Clearly, Emecheta is teaching men how to assert themselves. Her reconstruction of social norms has a particular meaning. Dismantling male authority is one of the strategies used by feminist writers to establish female authority. The writer seems to argue thus that the traditional gender relations which set men as powerful and superior to woman are arbitrary. Ojebeta's silence does not automatically mean Okolie's power and success. On the contrary, one notices that socially Ojebeta represents a hope, while her brother has no future. Maybe in Emecheta's conviction, this future is the future of male tradition, to use Nubupo's expression⁵. Okolie's fate in the novel as a powerless individual is not very different from Pa Palagada's. The narrator reveals this in the following extract:

Pa roared like a mad lion-so terrible was his voice that the whole house seemed to shake...(97).
He always cried for his mother whenever he had the slightest ailment, even if it was an ordinary minor touch of malaria. He was one of those big, manly males who would not hesitate to tell you that women were created as playthings for men, that they were brainless, mindless, and easily pliable. And yet it was to a woman that he would go to pour out his troubles, wanting her to listen, to sympathize and make appropriate noises, to give him a cuddle, tell him how handsome and kind he was, and how everything was going to be all right and that he should not worry (98).

This description presents a great understanding of Emecheta's position on male images. Simone de Beauvoir states that "in his solitude, a man looks to a woman to confer an absolute value upon his life"⁶; but Pa Palagada's situation is a totally different one. In his situation, he cannot elevate himself to the powerful and unshakable image which is attributed to man in his society. Emecheta's role reversal makes the woman the "female husband" of the home⁷. This technique is to create to woman the room for self-affirmation which should be achieved in solidarity for the benefit of the female sex in general.

⁵ - Komla Messan Nubukpo, « Womanist Discourse and the Future of Male Tradition in Modern African Literature » *BRIDGES: An African Journal of English Studies*. No.6 1995.

⁶ - See Cornelius F. Murphy, Jr. *Beyond Feminism: Toward a Dialogue on Difference* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1995).

⁷ - See Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987)

Women must fight against the fragmentation of energy. In this situation of Ojebeta where all men are irresponsible, women at least must save. But this was not really the case with Ma Palagada who bought the little girl as a slave. Even though Ojebeta later on left for her home town and was welcomed by a female relative, women's role in the story is ambiguous. What is the meaning of the role played by Victoria toward Ojebeta? Victoria is the daughter of Ma Palagada. The following extract shows light on her personality:

She [Ojebeta] knew that she had to hurry, before Miss Victoria resorted to bringing force to bear on her.... But she walked into Victoria, who this time was really irate.
"How dare you keep me waiting? ..She raised her right hand to strike as usual but Ojebeta used her clothes basket as a shield.
"I am not going to Bonny with you", she shouted defiantly. "I am going to my people. I'm going home! Her heart was beating fast. Her eyes were round and shone with the first joy of freedom. (148)
..... Give me back everything my mother gave you, you ungrateful slave!" (149).

The narrator's pain is visible in his presentation of the facts: "How could a kind person like Ma Palagada have given birth to such a vicious woman like this?" (149)

Feminism displays a philosophy of an intellectual and moral community in a fight for active participation in the making and the happenings of women's lives. It is true women's experiences and desires are diverse and difficult to reconcile; but women making other women outsiders and marginalizing them is a problem. In *The Slave Girl* we see many important female characters whose experiences are rather cloistered and whose existence depend on the exploitation of other women. In these circumstances, women's fight for a collective recognition has no promising future.

4. Power, Conventional Authority and Ideological Ambiguities

For men and women to collaborate, there must be a constructive use of sexual differences; and society must also renew the positive abilities of men. In *The Slave Girl*, who is more responsible for the plight of the protagonist Ojebeta? The nature and the scope of the logic behind the story suggest a distribution of anxiety from both man and woman. The phenomenon of oppression and the idea of liberation establish relationships of power which emphasize not only voicelessness but also power. Emecheta's novel clearly responds to the crisis between man and woman and affirms the possibility of women to thrive in hopeless situations. This strategic position sustains the fiction in a highly sophisticated structure. Using Ojebeta to explore the general condition of enslavement of woman, Emecheta explains that women are also creators of sufferings to other women and consequently, there is need to "educate" both. It is true that today women's literature is manifesting a number of preoccupations which take into consideration the problems of the entire society; but it is fundamentally believed that the well-being of the community cannot be achieved if woman is not liberated from bondage. Clearly, there is need for traditional interpersonal connections to be transgressed. But this cannot be achieved without pain. The construction of power relations in Emecheta's novel does not reveal men as having infinite potential as patriarchy proclaims. Patriarchy is a social

organization in which men dominate because they are considered to have an inborn authority which is conferred on them by God Himself. In the book of Genesis, maleness is given precedence⁸.

In the novel under study, the main reason which motivates Okolie's action of selling his sister is that he has no money to finance his out-of-age ceremony. The narrator's disdain to the sin is visible:

The thought of what he was planning to do to her began to nag at his mind and torment him again, however much he tried to suppress it. He was only doing the right thing, he told himself, the only possible thing. He had no alternative. He begged their dead fathers to forgive him, but what else was there for a young bachelor like himself to do with a little sister of merely seven years of age?...Mixed up with these feelings of self-justification, was the conviction that he desperately needed whatever money came his way to prepare himself for his coming-of-age dance, one of the most important events in his age group. He could not afford to do anything else. (Emecheta, 30)

Emecheta also gives Ma Palagada a very negative image, and this validates her feminist ideology which has always been considered radical by many critics. It is interesting that notice that the writer does not consider woman as an angel.

Feminism as ideology conceives that women are inferiorized, oppressed and dominated by a patriarchal society which denies them all opportunities and self-fulfilment. It considers that the traditional gender roles between man and woman are cultural, not biological. These roles weaken woman, preventing her from recognition and development. Consequently, the ideological commitment of the feminist movement is the redefinition of male-female relationships, giving voice and authority to woman to play important roles for her own survival and that of her community. In the artistic articulation of these concerns, many women adopt radical positions, advocating a role-reversal which makes woman more powerful than man. In many of Emecheta's major works, this radicalism is visible.

Appealing to the idea of universal human nature, feminism also argues that women, as well as men, should pursue the virtues that elevate all human kind⁹. For Cornelius F. Murphy, Jr.

When a culture is patriarchal, women are submissive. Under oppressive circumstances, a woman who gives herself up to the image of herself that men have created demeans her own existence. Thus to gain her personal identity, she must overcome the impositions of patriarchy. (Murphy, Jr. 96)

As we see, Feminism's agenda is to challenge all restrictions imposed to woman by tradition and culture. The renunciation of male domination pushes many African female writers to portray their male characters with negative images like in the case of Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*.

Feminism has taken many shades in Africa. This is due to the fact that many women have become aware that radical or liberal feminism does not take into

⁸ - Genesis 2 : 18-25

⁹ - This idea is largely developed in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Right of Woman*, ed. Charles W. Hageman, Jr. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967) and Zilla R. Eisenstein's *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*. New York: Longman, 1981.

consideration some preoccupations of women in Africa, where rebellion against society and tradition by woman is unconceivable and receives popular condemnation. African female writers are attentive to the violent reactions of their communities against the feminist philosophy. Consequently, they have developed African shades of feminism. This is what explains the role played by Pa Palagada whose useless nature is necessary for Ma Palagada's authority. His invisibility in the story participates to Emecheta's desire to dismantle the patriarchal structure which stifles woman, even though she acknowledges that "no woman is ever free" (161). That is why after her liberation from the Palagada house, Ojebeta needed a man for protection:

In a sense she was still not free now, for no woman or girl in Ibuza was free, except those who committed the abominable sin of prostitution or those who had been completely cast off or rejected by their people for offending one custom or another. A girl was owned, in particular, by her father or someone in place of her father or her older brother, and then, in general, by her group or homestead. (160).

It is this belief which made Okolie commit his crime on his little sister. It is also this complex situation that women must fight against. To succeed requires wisdom, but also intellectual maturity. From a psychological perspective, Pa Palagada's silence is a form of violence against the man's male pride through which men consider themselves as leaders from birth. In many homes where men are incapable to provide the family with their basic needs, woman must take her responsibilities. In these circumstances, the power left to him is ironically that which is linked to his traditional gender roles.

In her story, Emecheta has subverted traditional gender roles to the point that the reader is confused about her ideological stands. The socioeconomic determinants of the novel make woman dominator, but also dominated. Ma Palagada is the lord of her business. Consequently, she has power and influence; but Ogbanje Ojebeta, a girl child is poor with her family.

One issue making this novel ambiguous is why Ma Palagada died and Okolie survived to face her sister Ojebeta whom he sold some years before. The construction of the structure of this story does not provide a clear explanation to women's domination and oppression. The apparent realism in the text and the details provided to the different steps of the life experience of the little girl validate this position. Kyalo Mativo explains that,

The ideological struggle in literature congeals finally...into two schools of African writers: those who are answerable only to themselves and consider the "creative process" as private property, and those who use their craft for a social purpose. (Mativo 133)

Many African female writers have moved from personal life to the public; and Buchi Emecheta is well-known for that. The parameters and manifestations of her writings indicate an essentially pedagogical tone which gives a dynamic nature to *The Slave Girl*. If we accept the realistic referent as being at the core of the philosophy of the novel, its inherent specificity in terms of socio-cultural concerns is catalytic to the rise of women's consciousness. Understandably, the conceptual network of power relations which gives visibility to Ma Palagada creates a prison to the orphan

girl Ojebeta. The writer's combination of fear and hope forms a double psychological orientation. The painful confrontation of Ojebeta to the reality of the plight into which her brother Okolie pushes her, evokes a crime not only against the female sex, but also against humanity in general because the girl is only a child who is made slave. That is why "Okolie mourned the loss of his sister for days" (77). The confusion about Ma Palagada's enterprise is that

Ojebeta was one of the few Palagada girls lucky enough to be able to remember who her people were and to have been old enough to be able to recall the first love her parents had showered over her (134).

Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking book *The Second Sex* provides a vital and influential reference point in women's concerns. Ideas like oppression and resistance, sex and gender, race and racism constitute philosophical preoccupations for feminism. But if women resist oppression, should they oppress other women in the process? Many feminist scholars are conscious of the ambiguity of their philosophy, an ambiguity which makes many women to use patriarchal social patterns against one another, a situation to be regretted. Women proclaim that they are oppressed as sex; but they do not admit the privileges attached to their sex. It is important to make a difference between an earned strength and an unearned power. Even though Pa Palagada in *The Slave Girl* is represented as a non entity regarding the authority and power of her wife, he holds the manly power of the house. This is even visible in the fear that he inspires in the slaves of the house. Ma Palagada acknowledges this when Ojebeta tried to run away after the disappearance of her brother Okolie from the market where she was sold:

"Why did you let that bush untamed thing shout about the market like that? ...
 "As for you" she went on to Ojebeta, "when we get home, I am sending you up to Pa Palagada. He would certainly like to meet you after a performance like this".
 "Ah, ah!" the other girls gasped, for them Pa Palagada meant big punishment" (67)

Looking at the damaging effects of women's power which creates undeserved harms, especially to other women in *The Slave Girl*, we wonder if the writer indirectly means that women are always losers in what we can refer to as a gender war. Clearly, it is to dramatize woman's plight that Emecheta brings the setting to a market place where the girl is sold. Obioma Nnaemeka's *Sisterhood: Feminisms and Power* (1998), makes fruitful proposals for women's bonding in their fight for recognition and liberation.

5. Context and Social Meaning in *The Slave Girl*

The life journey of Ojebeta provokes some multidimensional social problems. Why is it that Emecheta makes Ma Palagada the leader of the household? What is the meaning of her death in the story? Does the writer suspect her of anything? Has she been a good leader of the household? Does she condemn her for her failure to infuse energy in human nature? Emecheta is not clear. It is true that Ma Palagada could have given a good lesson to Okolie; a lesson like the one given to Okonkwo's lazy father Unoka in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: "Go home and work like a

man"¹⁰. Her death creates to the little orphan a brutally complex situation. The narrator's comment is straightforward:

We heard what Miss Victoria said, and your decision. And I think you are very wise. *Go to your people. Even if they can only afford to give you mushroom instead of meat, you'll know that it a mushroom of freedom.*
"Thank you all very much....I don't really know why I'm crying; but believe me, *I would rather be a poor girl in Ibuza than a well-fed slave in this house. I should be really happy....*"
She wiped the tears from her eyes.....
"Please thank Chiago for me. Whenever I come to Otu, I shall always look for you."
Ojebeta glanced back only once at the building that had been her home for the past nine years. She did not regret anything though the death of Ma still hurt her as if she had been her real mother.(150; my italics)

This extract displays our main concern in this study. What has Ma Palagada contributed to the improvement of the life of the little orphan Ojebeta? Even after her death, the other girls could no more find their way home because she bought them as children. In these circumstances what notice is that these children have no way out. The woman is portrayed as a success. But success in what? The social relevance of her keeping the children can be reduced to the fact that she contributes to the flourishing of her business. The primary meaning of developing a cohesive spirit among women is that success is difficult when there is not a unity of action. Maybe it is in this sense that Ma's death can be understood.

It is clear that in the effort to control one's life, one can reproduce oppression through a wrong use of power. This situation is visible with men but also with women, especially the market women of the novel who impose themselves through their economic power. Through their lives they perpetuate the gender imbalance which they set off to fight against in the first place. Characteristically, Emecheta's novels reveal that the centre of power can be moved from man to woman. This role reversal strategy which pushes men to the margin, is a problem because it creates other problems to woman in her noble fight for liberation.

Talking about Okolie, the narrator ironically points out:

....he was busy speculating about what he was going to ask this relative, now very distant, to pay for Ogbanje Ojebeta. He had never sold anyone before, and now he persuaded himself that what he was about to do was not selling in its actual sense. He was giving his sister away into the keeping of this rich lady, and getting some money for her so that, when she grew up, she might be given to a suitable husband and could collect a bride price...
'..I deserve to have the money I need so badly for my coming-of-age dance. *She will be well looked after there better than I can afford to do in Ibuza...This is the only way she can survive and grow into adulthood.*(31; my emphasis).

Even Enuha, Okolie's senior brother who disappeared from home a long time ago, displays an irresponsibility which can be said to be a parameter of Ojebeta's plight. Through these characters' actions in Ojebeta's life, Emecheta draws the reader's attention to the lack of parental love from many men. African family life commands that people should take care of each other, and it is this characteristic which makes it particular and vital. The problem is that Feminist ideology recognizes at least that men protect their children. This has been shown by Ojebeta's father,

¹⁰ - Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. (London: Heinemann, 1958) p. 13.

Okweku Oda. It is this responsibility which has been violated by Okolie who in the process becomes a social pariah: "Okolie saw the situation.... They would instead call him Okolie who sold his sister for money" (34). "He walked quickly, galloping like a mighty horse, not very much aware of the plump little girl he was carrying away to be sold" (30). Okolie, his brother Enuha and Pa Palagada are the same bloc of powerless people because they lack sufficient intellectual and material potentialities. By conceiving these characters thus, the writer dismantles male authority and the patriarchal structure which maintain women in a prison. Through their incapacity to lead their life the way they desire, they live in a prison of a different sort. This is probably a warning that if woman is not free, man will not be free either. Many of the things Pa Palagada does are to satisfy his wife to show his support to her affairs. The narrator reveals:

The big girl, who had by now composed herself again, told the small girl to keep quiet and keep her eyes on her work or she would take her to Pa Palagada when they got home. At the mention of that name there was such an unnatural hush that one would have thought that whoever this person or apparition called "Pa Palagada" was his powers must be immense. (41)

Pa's solidarity to his wife here is to help keep better the girls under oppression. The problem is that this business contributes nothing to their fulfilment. Another female character, a famous market woman recognizes the absurdity of their work. "It might be evil, but it was a necessary evil". (60). It is this evil that male characters like Okolie and Pa Palagada support and help improve. The double jeopardy in the philosophy of the novelist betrays an ambiguous situation in which men and women put themselves in a cycle of unease which is visible till the end of the story. Many other issues, ranging from the slave girls to the children of the Palagadas indicate this ambiguity. While Victoria the female character and daughter of the Palagadas is a wicked person who destroys her mother's heritage after the death of the latter, her brother Clifford shows as a very generous person who even protects the slaves with the will to grant them real freedom. Ojebeta took advantage of this to return to her people in the village.

6. Conclusion

In Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, there is clearly an insight into gender questions. The writer restructures the traditional relationships among individuals in the home as all feminists. And in so doing woman has acquired power and visibility in the home and even outside. Famous market women like Ma Mee and Ma Palagada turned presumed weakness into strength. But the writer's version of feminism which gives power to women to keep fellow women under slavery is problematic. Even though women's experience and expectations are varied and very complex, it is my belief that if their fight does not incorporate the concerns of the poor and the helpless, it is doomed to failure. What is the use of an acquired strength if it is not creative?

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