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AFRICAN WOMEN'S QUEST FOR SELF-REALIZATION

BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN

The Slave Girl AND *The Joys of Motherhood* by

Buchi Emecheta

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African Women's Quest for Self-Realization between
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Motherhood* By Buchi Emecheta

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the substance of this dissertation (thesis) is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

Date: 30- 06- 2009

Signed:

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Abstract

Whether or not Buchi Emecheta's novels hold an articulate feminist ideology has been subject to hot debates among critics. Some views seem to find in Emecheta's representation of the female experience an attack on the traditional patriarchal values of her society, and hence a call for a complete break with traditions. Others find that traditional African women enjoyed some degree of freedom and autonomy that were undermined by their contact with the West after the colonization of their countries. Therefore, according to them, the motif of her novels is to denounce the colonial oppression of traditional women.

The purpose of this dissertation is to evaluate of the female experience in Emecheta's novels, *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood* in an attempt to understand the implications of both patriarchy and colonialism in the shaping of the Nigerian feminine self. It is a study of the representation of the Nigerian woman's identity as female, black, colonized, and African in order to explain how race and gender were woven together as determinant factors that affected the female experience during the colonial period.

Our aim is to explore Buchi Emecheta's construction of womanhood in terms of the Self/Other concept which was developed by existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and given a feminist dimension by Simone de Beauvoir. This concept will equally inform our study of the colonizer/colonized relation in order the explain the situation of Nigerian women under British rule.

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Introduction

The publication of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* by Ama Ata Aidoo in 1965 and *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa in 1966 signaled the beginning of women's literature in Africa.¹ Since then, many works have been produced by African women writers who find in literature a way to expose important issues concerning the social, political and economic situation of women in their countries. The aim of this dissertation is to study the status of Nigerian women in two of Buchi Emecheta's novels entitled *The Slave Girl*(1977) and *The Joys of Motherhood*(1979).

Emecheta's concern with women's self-assertion in society may be the outcome of her personal experience. Before her immigration to England, Emecheta faced the difficulty to realize her dreams to become an educated and successful woman because her traditional society denied girls access to schools. Emecheta equally witnessed the colonization of her country by the British and the drastic change in Nigerian people's life as a result of their contact with the West. After realizing the importance of this transitional period in the shaping of the status of today's Nigerian women, Emecheta generally depicts women trying to reach self-realization through the values of their African traditional society and the realities of their colonized and post-colonized country.

In fact, the colonial era was a turning point in the life of Nigerian people because it was a moment when their African traditions and customs came in conflict with the new Western values introduced by the British. African people lived a real dilemma about how to preserve their 'African' identity and adapt themselves to the inevitable modernization of their country with all the elements that accompanied it including

urbanisation, education, Christianity, in addition to the new economic and social systems influenced by the West.

It is interesting to see how women's identity evolved in this period especially as far as gender relations are concerned, and this is reflected in Emecheta's works. Her protagonists are generally women caught between the traditional construction of womanhood that was mainly centered on their traditional roles as mothers and wives on one hand, and the requirements of modern life on the other. They live an internal conflict which is often difficult to articulate and Emecheta tries to give voice to her female characters to speak about the problems of these women. This conflicting situation to which most African women were confronted is treated in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Slave Girl*. The two novels offer a good illustration of African women's status between tradition and modernity through the story of the two protagonists, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* and Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl*.

In both novels, this antagonism between indigenous and western values is given literary treatment by Emecheta through the rural/urban dichotomy. Indeed, the Igbo² village of Ibuza appears as the place where people are still living following the old ways. This village where Nnu Ego and Ojebeta spend their early life serves as a good context to demonstrate the traditional status of women.

To contrast this rural place that symbolizes traditions, the cities of Lagos in *The Joys of Motherhood* and Onitsha in *The Slave Girl* are used by Emecheta to represent the urban environment in which the main characters experience modern life under the influence of colonialism. It is only through the study of these two

environments with their different components and the way the two characters react to them that we can manage to understand the impact of tradition and modernity on the shaping of Nigerian women's identity. Hence, Emecheta's concerns are twofold; they address both the traditional Igbo society and the contact culture of urban Nigeria.

The two novels start by describing the traditional tribal society which is characterized by a strong patriarchal order. Women's life seems to be centered on wifehood and motherhood and without these roles, a woman can rarely reach self-fulfillment. Emecheta similarly shows that this society offers some advantages to traditional women who participate in the economic life through the monopoly of trade, in addition to a complete freedom of movement because women were not confined in the domestic sphere.

When these women were displaced to the modern context of the city, all the assumptions about the traditional identity were put into question. Society was growing more individualistic following the gradually established capitalist system, in addition to the new social organization based on the nuclear family system. Moreover, under the colonial rule, men's power decreased because they were controlled by the whites and this context allows Emecheta to question the patriarchal authority. The introduction of education opened new opportunities for the individual to assert himself/herself, but here again women were excluded from schools by both traditions and colonial institutions.

The traditional society is characterized by its strong community ties while modernity gives privilege to the individual. We can hardly dissociate the

tradition/modernity dichotomy from the community/individual antagonism. Therefore, the question that we may ask here is whether it is possible to Nigerian women to free themselves from the constraints of some traditions and reach self-fulfillment without necessarily sacrificing their African identity for Western modernity. In other words, how can the feminine self assert herself as an individual in the highly communal Nigerian society with all the traditions that may limit her quest for self-realization.

Our research is an attempt to provide satisfactory answers to these questions through the analysis of *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood* since both works treat the theme of women's quest for self-realization between traditions and modernity. They portray women trying to find a place for themselves in their changing society. In *The Slave Girl*, the main character, Ojebeta is sold to slavery by her own brother and finds herself living in the town of Onitsha. Through the whole novel, she tries to free herself from slavery and recover her lost identity as a free woman. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego is equally taken from her traditional village to live in Lagos with a man that she does not love and all her life is going to be centered on her ability to bear children. Being a mother is for her the only way to reach self-fulfillment; however, her experiences make her question this belief.

In this work, we intend to approach Emecheta's novels from a feminist perspective. The feminist critical approach will provide the appropriate tools to examine the way female characters are portrayed in these literary texts.³ Feminist literary criticism "offers strategies for analyzing texts to emphasize issues related to gender and sexuality in works written by both men and women, but particularly concerned with

women's writing."⁴ One of the early concepts of feminism go back to the works of the French philosopher and feminist, Simone de Beauvoir and her famous book *The Second Sex*. She was the first to define gender as a social construct and not as biologically given with her famous sentence: "One is not born a woman; one becomes one." Hence, women are not born weak, it is rather society with its cultural values that sees them as the "weaker sex" or a man's "other."⁵

However, it must be noted that there have been many debates among critics concerning the feminist aspect of Emecheta's works. Her novels bear some complexity for although she questions gender inequities and advocates the self-assertion of women as individuals, she has an inconsistent respect for her African community and traditional systems. Feminism is generally defined by European feminists as a profoundly individualistic philosophy which calls for a break with traditions that may privilege the interests of the community over those of the individual.⁶ However, for most African societies, communal ties constitute an important part of the black cultural identity. Like most African women writers, Emecheta faced the difficulty to combine feminist individuation in which a woman exists as an independent entity and African traditionalism which values the group. Because of this controversial issue of feminism versus traditionalism, we can find some ambiguity in Emecheta's representation of women's feminist aspiration for self-fulfillment and their commitment to their African communities.

Emecheta's works reflect the complexity of her society and this fact was delineated by several critical readings of her novels like Rolf Solberg's *The Woman of Black Africa* (1983), Chikwenyi Ogunyemi's *Buchi Emecheta: The Shaping of a*

Self"(1983), Cynthia Ward's *"What they Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of 'Otherness' "*(1990), and Katherine Fishburn's *Reading Buchi Emecheta: Cross-Cultural Conversations* (1995). They all treat the paradoxical aspects of her novels which enclose two visions; one that is feminist and the other denying feminism.⁷ Indeed, Emecheta calls herself 'African feminist with a small *f*';⁸ therefore, it would be particularly challenging to study her novels in relation to feminism in an attempt to unravel her perception of what an African feminism is.

Early feminism of the 1960's and 1970's was developed by European and American feminists like Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter who exposed literature as a manifestation of male power and denounced patriarchal constructs and sexist discrimination that contributed to women's oppression. Race was not an important concern for this early wave of feminism and for this reason many African writers and critics did not accept the "feminist" label, especially the radical and separatist branches of feminism according to which women should create a world apart from men in order to free themselves. Some African critics and writers rejected also the western feminist's universalization of women's experience because it leads to the exclusion of cultural and historical differences of the literary works of Africa and its diaspora.

Feminist literary criticism made its way to African literature by the 1980's when works by African women writers started to constitute an increasingly important part of African literature. Feminism generally questions power relations between men and women in society in order to articulate a critical and intellectual practice that challenges all patriarchal assumptions and resists the objectification of women in

society and literature. It also aims at answering questions about what it is to be a woman in society and how the feminine is constructed and defined.⁹ However, African feminists have not treated patriarchy as the only factor of women's subjugation. They give an importance to the "epistemic as well as material violence of colonialism as a primary inhibitor of the aspiration of women."¹⁰ The main scholars of African feminist literary criticism are: Carole Boyce Davies, Florence Stratton, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi and Chikwenyi Ogunyemi whose works will give an insight into Emecheta's exploration of colonial discourses as well as female subjectivity.

Because they share a history that had been heavily impacted by racial oppression, many African, African-American and Caribbean writers and critics associate with womanism, a term coined by the American writer and critic Alice Walker. Their aim was the creation of a new movement of criticism based on black aesthetics in order to differentiate themselves from white feminism. Alice Walker defines womanism as a "philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideal of black life while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood.....its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self healing."¹¹ It offers avenues to foster strong relationships between black women and men because of its commitment to the "survival and wholeness of entire people male and female."¹² Womanism advocates the coexistence and pluralism of ethnic groups and races provided by Walker's metaphor of the "flower garden with every color flower represented,"¹³ in addition to black women's moral and epistemological superiority because of their suffering under racial oppression. Womanism is an extension of black feminism; a movement developed by black

American women writers and critics in reaction to the feminist movement of the 1970's in Europe and America. For black feminists such as Barbara Christian, Deborah MacDowell, and Valerie Smith, trends of feminism that ignore race as a form of oppression and focus only on sexism cannot represent black women's experiences. They developed "a literary theory that seeks to explore representations of black women's lives through techniques of analysis which suspend the variable of race, class, and gender in mutually interrogative relation."¹⁴ Our research on Emecheta's fiction rests on the importance of offering a variety of readings based on different feminist ideologies; therefore, the works of African as well as African American critics seem useful to have such reading.

Colonialism is an equally important factor that has shaped Emecheta's representation of her female characters. Hence, in addition to gender, our research will examine the racial relations between the colonizer and colonized. In order to understand colonialism in her novels, we intend to use the works of some post-colonial and cultural theorists especially Frantz Fanon and Abdul JanMohamed who are concerned with the racism of colonialism. Frantz Fanon's famous work **Peau Noire, Masques Blancs** is based on exposing the binary opposition of colonialism; the colonizer as the 'self' versus the colonized as the 'other'. His analysis of the black/white relationship is explained in terms of a world divided into two distinct poles which are in constant conflict, a manichean universe of double consciousness that Abdul JanMohamed describes as an "allegory of white and black, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object."¹⁵ This model seems to intersect with the feminist ideology since

"otherness" prevails in both theories. In patriarchy, women were often subject to a gender-based oppression and discrimination as they were subjugated and marginalized in colonial societies by the colonizer. Therefore, we intend to use the theory of Simone de Beauvoir to explain the "othering" of woman from a feminist perspective while the theories of Frantz Fanon and Abdul JanMohamed will provide insight into the study of woman as the colonized "other".

Our thesis will be organized according to the following outline: the first part which is divided into three chapters is concerned with the traditional construction of womanhood in the rural environment of Ibadan. Since patriarchy is the main characteristic of traditional society, it will be the first point to examine in order to show how the patriarchal system conceives of a woman's identity. The second chapter treats the theme of domestic slavery which is used by Buchi Emecheta as a metaphor for the traditional construction of marriage. The last chapter of the first part deals with motherhood and its importance for traditional women's existence.

The displacement of Nnu Ego and Ojebeta to the urbanized centers of Lagos and Onitsha symbolizes the beginning of a new phase in their life. Following the same organization, the second part of our research is concerned with life in the city and all the new elements that characterized this environment. Among these elements, colonialism appears as an important factor of change. Therefore, the first chapter of this part deals with the British rule in Nigeria and the economic upheavals that followed it. The second chapter treats the social side of urban life including other elements generated by colonialism notably education and Christianity.

Notes:

- 1-**The Dilemma of a Ghost** by Ama Ata Aidoo is the first play written by an African woman writer. It was staged in 1964 and published a year later while Flora Nwapa's **Efuru** is considered as the first novel in African women's literature.
- 2-The Igbo or Ibo represents a large ethnic group living in Southeastern Nigeria.
- 3-J.A.Cuddon.**The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory**. London: Penguin,1999,p.315.
- 4- Shari Benstock, Suzanne Ferries and Susanne Woods. **A Handbook of Literary Feminisms**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.153.
- 5- Simone de Beauvoir. **The Second Sex** (trans. And ed. H. M. Parshley). New York: Vintage, 1989. p.xxxv. Initially printed in French as **Le Deuxième Sexe** in 1949.
- 6- See Katherine Frank. "*Feminist Criticism and the African Novel*".In Eldred Jones (ed). **African Literature Today**.No.14. London: Heinemann, 1984, p.45.
- 7- Ogunyemi Okonjo Chikwenye. **Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Woman**. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996, p.223.
- 8- Buchi Emecheta. "*Feminism with a small 'f'!*".In Kristen Holst Petersen (ed). **Criticism and Ideology**. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988, p.175.
- 9- See Carole Boyce Davies. **Black Women, Writing and Identity**. London and New York: Routledge, 1999,p.28.
- 10- See Simon Gikandi. **Encyclopedia of African Literature**. London: Taylor and Francis , 2003,p.266.
- 11- Alice Walker. **In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose**. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983,pp. 231-243.
- 12- Ibid., p.xi.
- 13- Ibid.
- 14- Valerie Smith. "*Black Feminist Theory and the representation of the 'other'*". In Cheryl. A. Wall (ed). **Changing our own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women**. London: Routledge, 1990, p.48.
- 15-Abdul R. JanMohamed. **Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa**. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, p.4.

Part one

**The Status of Women in a Traditional African
Society: Women in "Ibuza"**

Chapter 1:

Patriarchy and the Construction of Womanhood

The clash between traditional and modern values and its impact on women's identity is the main theme of Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. In order to demonstrate this clash, Emecheta tries to draw a complete picture of how women were living in a traditional rural environment, and then she takes her protagonists to live in an urbanized and modern place. The agrarian small town of Ibuza is used in both novels as the traditional background where the protagonists, Ojebeta and Nnu Ego spend their early life. The novels start with a set of chapters that describe some aspects of African society before the coming of the British colonizers. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, it is through flashbacks that the readers discover life in Ibuza. The novel opens with Nnu Ego running through the streets of 1930's Lagos to throw herself into the river after the death of her first child. This chapter is followed by a long flashback through which light is cast on her life before she went to Lagos. In *The Slave Girl*, a prologue takes the reader to the time when the village of Ibuza was founded by an Igbo prince who was chased by his own father because he committed a murder, and then the first chapter recalls the birth of Ojebeta. Nnu Ego and Ojebeta's lives begin in this village around the 1900's and span almost the entire colonial period in Nigeria until the early 1960's. Hence, the two novels offer a good illustration of Nigerian women's experience with colonialism.

This chapter is concerned with the study of gender relations in the traditional society. Gender identity is a process-making, and in order to understand this concept, we have to look at the society which shapes it. A person's awareness of his maleness or her femaleness occurs at an early age. Therefore, the childhood of the main

characters is the most important period of their life since it is the moment of their socialization to fit the traditional perception of what a woman is and this period is going to affect the two characters' development in the novels.

The environment in which Nnu Ego and Ojebeta grow up is governed by a patriarchal system. Patriarchy is generally associated with the foundation of human societies. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels explains that in pre-history, which is described as the period of barbarism, the difference between men and women was of little importance. He shows that primitive societies exhibited egalitarian social relations based on collective ownership of property and these societies were matrilineal. With the development of new techniques of agriculture and stockbreeding, civilizations started to be founded. There was an accumulation of wealth and private property appeared which subsequently gave rise to competition between men who began to exchange not only products, but also slaves. Women were likewise exchanged because of their reproductive values. Wealth allowed men to have a better status in the family and property became inherited from father to son. Hence, the patriarchal system appeared when men began to use power to impose authority on women. Although they had some privileges denied to slaves, women were given a second position after men who had the exclusive authority in the patriarchal family.¹

This historical account of the origin of patriarchy has informed the works of many feminists starting with Simone de Beauvoir. Although views may differ about Engels's theory on the foundation of patriarchy and the historical evidence that matriarchies had well existed, most feminists agree with the definition of the

patriarchal system as the rule of the fathers. Adriene Rich, for example, explains patriarchy as follows:

The power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure, or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labour, men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subjugated to male.²

The society of Ibuza seems to fit Rich's definition of patriarchy as a system that is dominated by men. One way of explaining patriarchy from a feminist perspective is to study the relations daughter/father and husband/wife in order to show how man exercises power and the reaction of woman to his domination. Emecheta's literary treatment of patriarchy is achieved in both novels through the representation of male characters as figures of power in the traditional Nigerian society. In the chapters describing life in Ibuza, we can notice that the voice of men is dominant while the female characters are rather silent. This narrating technique described by Katherine Fishburn as "the Father's voice" is used by Emecheta as a way to convey "the culture's authoritative discourse"³ based on men's power. In other words, the power of patriarchy is given full expression in the male voice represented by Nnu Ego's father and husband in *The Joys of Motherhood* and Ojebeta's father and brother in *The Slave Girl*. By contrast, it is in the city that the female protagonists are voiced by the writer and this may suggest the lessening of the power of this system in modern urban places and eventually a possible change in the development of these characters.

The voice of the father in *The Slave Girl* is represented by Ojebeta's father Okwuekwu Oda and after his death by her brother Okolie. When the novel opens, the first voice that we hear is that of Okwuekwu, and the first word he articulates is:

"Sons"(p.5). Emecheta's choice to start her work with this word may suggest her attempt to accentuate from the beginning the highly patriarchal nature of the traditional Nigerian society and the great privilege given to sons.

In fact, Nigeria, as many African societies, is a men's country although there have been several outstanding women who succeeded to gain political power and Queen Amina of Zaria is a notable example.⁴ However, those few powerful women did not make matriarchies replace the patriarchal organization because "the basic framework is one of patriarchy. As elsewhere, men ruled and dominated."⁵ Men in Ibo are the leaders of society and the character Okwuekwu Oda represents the patriarchal organization since he has an absolute authority in his household. He embodies the image of the traditional man who works hard as a farmer and tries to get the highest social titles in his tribe.

However, unlike many people of his position, he refuses to take many wives "although he was entitled to marry as many wives as he wanted and he knows many husbands who enjoyed the benefits of polygamy, he was simply not that type of man"(p.6). Hence, polygamy seems to be strongly related to patriarchy and having several wives is a sign of wealth and power in Ibo. Indeed, a man's social status is determined by his success as a farmer, the social titles that he obtains, in addition to the number of wives he has. By "the benefits of polygamy", Emecheta means that women were a valuable working force in traditional societies because they worked hand in hand with their husbands and "a new younger wife would mean another pair of hands on his farm"(p.6).

Okwuekwu Oda is a rather rich man who, in addition to his work in farming, is employed as a messenger for the British court and this second job provides him with enough money to have workers in his farm. Thanks to his good financial situation, he does not need several wives to help him in farming which is not the case of most Ibuza men, which shows that polygamy is partly practiced for economic reasons. However, it must be noted that Umeadi remains the only wife in Okwuekwu's life mainly because she has fulfilled her role as a traditional wife by giving birth to two sons, Enuha and Okolie who like their father were promising farmers. Having sons is very important to a patriarch so that his name is perpetuated.

Men's domination of women is given an existentialist explanation by the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre and Hegel's philosophy, she explains man-woman relationships in terms of the Subject/Other concept. She observes that "otherness" which is "a fundamental category of human thought"⁶ is tied to a person's self-consciousness since "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness."⁷ A self can exist as subject only by defining itself in opposition to another; hence, a subject sets himself up as the essential as opposed to the "other" which is the object. She argues that within the patriarchal system "[woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other."⁸ De Beauvoir further writes: "The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject - who always regards the self as essential - and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential."⁹ Therefore,

following de Beauvoir's analysis of patriarchy, our aim is to look at Emecheta's representation of the traditional society in an attempt to detect the cultural and social strategies that transform woman into man's "other".

Emecheta puts emphasis on some traditions of Ibo society to demonstrate men's power and privileged status such as social titles which are given only to men. When Umeadi was delivering her last baby, the writer explains that she could not have the child in her husband's hut because "an 'unclean' woman was never allowed into the hut of a man with the *Alo* title. Okwuekwu had such a title"(p.9). Hence, losing blood which is a natural biological aspect that accompanies birth giving is considered as a sign of "uncleanness" by traditions and women are excluded from some places because of this biological difference. Men's domination is similarly demonstrated through the mourning episode when Umeadi loses her husband. Emecheta clearly shows the god-like image of men and the dependence of women on them so much so that a woman "was not really expected to survive long after the death of her husband"(p.21).

In fact, Umeadi becomes victim of many cultural restrictions when Okwuekwu dies. She is, for instance, forbidden to visit the stream, to bathe, or to enter any hut where the man of the family has titles. This may confirm de Beauvoir's view that a woman is always defined in relation to man because without Okwuekwu, Umeadi is deprived of some of her rights as a person. She becomes "inessential" to the extent that her death in the period of mourning is considered by her people as a sin, and since "the custom had demanded that her body be thrown in the 'bad bush'"(p.80), Umeadi did not receive any burial ceremony. This treatment of widows is an example of the customs which caused traditional women's sufferings since it

perpetuated the ideology that a woman alone cannot exist as a self-fulfilled individual.

However, despite the great privilege given to men in Ibuza, Emecheta presents the birth of the main character Ojebeta as an important and happy event in her family. We eventually learn that Okwuekwu "would have liked a baby girl, but what was the use, when all the girls his wife bore him always died after a few hours"(p.6). This statement is very important because it shows that although Okwueku is living in a male-dominated society, for him, having a girl can be a source of joy. Emecheta's construction of this character is very interesting; he is a man who rejects "the benefits of polygamy" and we see here his desire to have a baby girl. Okwuekwu embodies the values of his patriarchal society, but he is capable of showing respect and love towards women around him. Through this character, the writer presents an image of a traditional man who does not adhere blindly to the norms of his traditional society which made of polygamy a sign of manhood. Although he has a complete authority over his family, Okwuekwu equally appears as a loving husband who cares for his ill and weak wife.

The birth of Ojebeta makes her parents extremely happy which is unusual in that male-centered society where girls were not generally welcomed and this fact is clearly expressed by the narrator: "girl children *were not normally particularly prized creatures* but Okwuekwu had lost so many that they now assumed a quality of preciousness"(p.12) [emphasis added]. The critic Barbara Christian finds a contradiction in most traditional African societies' consideration of women. For her "the value given to sons, however, indicates the ambivalent status of women.

Daughters are not as valued, since their primary destiny is to become mothers, yet a role so necessary to the society."¹⁰ While motherhood is idealized by most African cultures, girls are not "prized creatures"; thus, a woman generally remains unvalued until she becomes a mother of sons.

Ojebeta becomes then a precious being especially when her father learns that she is an Ogbanje. An ogbanje is a child who refuses to stay alive with his/her parents because "she has an agreement with her friends in the land of the dead "(p.10). The "dibia" or diviner further suggests that only some charms brought from the distant land of "Idu"* can help her to stay and her father puts his life in danger to bring them and save his dear daughter.

Although the charms are simple coins, Ojebeta survives and she carries them all her life. These charms are rather used in the novel as symbols of Ojebeta's identity since they will always remind her of her happy childhood spent with her loving parents. Ojebeta's problems start when a tragedy strikes her life in the form of "felenza", the 1917-1918 international influenza epidemics which killed her mother and father. Enuha flees the town of Ibuza in search of a European job and the seven-year-old girl remains with her young brother Okolie. When Okwuekwu dies, the patriarchal authority passes to Okolie who now has the absolute right to control his sister's life.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, through a flashback Emecheta takes the readers to Nnu Ego's early life in Ibuza at a time when Nigeria was falling in the grip of British colonialism. Just like Ojebeta, Nnu Ego is born in a patriarchal system, but it seems that in *The Joys of Motherhood* this order is more emphasized by Emecheta. Nnu

Ego's father is a powerful and wealthy local chief called Nwokocho Agbadi and through this character, the writer shows how patriarchy was exercised in traditional Igbo society. Agbadi is, therefore, the symbol of men's power in the novel and his authority is conveyed through his voice which continues to be heard in his daughter's mind even after she leaves Ibuza. Men's power is an important issue that has been widely explored by most feminists who describe patriarchy as a system which subjugates women and reject all traditions, social conventions, economic and political systems that grant men an absolute authority over women.

According to Lukes, power relations between men and women can be exercised in three different ways: first through compliance which implies that a powerful group of people imposes its will on the others and the result is the subjugation of women by the powerful men in the patriarchal system. Another way of exercising power in gender relation has been related to the concept of dependence; that is women are financially dependent on men who have to ensure the subsistence of the family while women stay at home. And lastly, he relates power control to inequality. Men and women do not have equal access to the material sources so that men and women do not have the same social and material rewards.¹¹

In fact, compliance seems to be the most appropriate form of power to describe the way Emecheta builds male-female relations within the patriarchal society of Ibuza. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the character of Agbadi is presented as a man who "ruled his family and children as if he were a god"(p.15). This god-like figure of the father to whom respect and obedience must be paid by women is among the images that Emecheta tries to deconstruct throughout the novel. The writer uses the word

"rule" to demonstrate that in the patriarchal order, a woman had a subordinate role in the family while men were the rulers. Agbadi can be considered as "the absolute" since he has a complete authority over all women around him. By being the "subject", his wives are automatically conceived of in social signification as the "others". Emecheta explains how Agbadi's wives, women slaves, and mistresses "were willing to worship and serve him in all things"(p.12). Within patriarchy, a man can feel that he is "the absolute" only by making a woman his "other" through the monopoly of power. The following description of Agbadi shows that he imposes his authority because of his physical strength:

Nwokocha Agbadi was a very wealthy local chief. He was a great wrestler, and was glib and gifted in oratory.....He was taller than most men and, since he was born in an age when physical prowess determined one's role in life, people naturally accepted him as a leader. Like most handsome men who are aware of their charismatic image, he had many women in his home (p.10).

Physical strength determined a man's role in society and it seems that only powerful men were privileged. Another point that is equally important in this description is the fact that Agbadi has many wives, which makes of him a true patriarch who unlike Okwuekwu enjoys the "benefits of polygamy." It is explained that "whenever they raided a neighboring village, Agbadi was sure to come back with the best looking women"(p.10). Because of their physical weakness, women were generally captured in case of wars and this was another reason that could explain why girls were not "prized creatures."

In fact, the physical superiority of man in comparison with woman is linked, according to de Beauvoir, to the concepts of immanence and transcendence. Historically women have been doomed to immanence which refers to "a sphere or

mode of existence characterized by passivity, submission to biological fate, and confinement or restriction to a narrow round of uncreative and repetitive chores."¹² Men, on the other hand, are associated with transcendence which is defined as "a sphere or mode of existence characterized by activity, by freedom from biological fate, by the freedom to burst out of the present and into the future, by a capacity to transform the world so that it accommodates itself to one's intentions."¹³ The concept of transcendence is illustrated in both novels by Agbadi and Okwuekwu who both confronted the hostility of nature and succeeded to conquer it. In fact, Agbadi is a hunter who continually uses his creative capacities to develop tools and tricks that allow him to impose his superiority on other "species". His actions help to transform the external world and open possibilities to change and improve the future. Okwuekwu has similarly put his power to test when he makes the dangerous journey to the land of Idu through which he risks his life and has to find ways to defeat other creatures. By doing so, men assert themselves as subjects; they transcend their biological limitation to impose their supremacy on nature and confirm their existence. Ibuza women, on the other hand, cannot confront the world because they are physically ill-equipped to face the dangers of nature and remain restricted to passive functions such as repetitive domestic chores which do not require creativity or risk.

Therefore, women in Ibuza cannot transcend their immanent status because within that society, physical power is still an essential means to challenge nature and dominate it. It is true that with modernity and the invention of machinery, the importance of physical strength decreased considerably and through their access to

the same jobs as men, women can do creative work and free themselves from passivity. However, here again women find a difficulty to completely transcend immanence because while they have access to creative work, they still perform the passive functions of domesticity, which put them in another dilemma of how to reconcile the public and domestic spheres.

Hence, transcendence is another concept that explains man's superiority in the patriarchal system, but in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta demonstrates that man's power is not absolute through the character of Nnu Ego's mother, Ona. Unlike Agbadi's wives, Ona refuses to be his "other" and this makes of her an important character in the novel. Ona allows the writer to question the authority of men and show that socialization is responsible for making a woman weak and subjugated. The conception of Agbadi and Ona's relation seems to correspond to de Beauvoir's view of "self" and "other". In fact, while de Beauvoir claims that the construction of the "other" is necessary for the existence of the subject, the "other consciousness sets up a reciprocal claim" to assert itself.¹⁴ Ona resists his domination by setting herself as a "subject".

To accentuate the strength of Ona as a female character, Emecheta makes of her the only round female character before Nnu Ego's birth. In fact, while all women in Agbadi's household are presented as flat characters who even fall into stereotypes of the submissive traditional Nigerian woman, Ona appears as an unconventional and complex character who is outspoken and has a fully developed personality.

Ona is the daughter of a powerful and wealthy chief called Obi Umunna who fails to have male children. She is treated by her father as a substitute for the son that he

does not have and her different upbringing makes of her the strong and proud woman she is. By being socialized like a man, Ona becomes Agbadi's equal because she does not accept his authority as most Ibuza women do. Moreover, Agbadi cannot marry her because she was expected to give her father the sons that he wanted:

Her father, despite having several wives, had few children, and in fact no living son at all, but Ona grew to fill her father's expectation. He had maintained that she must never marry; his daughter was never going to stoop to any man. She was free to have men, however, and if she bore a son, he would take her father's name, thereby rectifying the omission nature had made (pp.11-12).

This passage represents an example of the culture's authoritative discourse which is carried out by the figure of the father. This culture gives Obi Umunna the power to deny his daughter the right to have a life of her own and he uses her to rehabilitate his social status. Ona cannot marry Agbadi or any other man because her father refuses to accept the bride price that is offered by her several suitors so that she remains her father's. Agbadi loves Ona, but he cannot impose any kind of authority over her and it is interesting to note the strength with which she resists his attempt to control her. When Agbadi wants her to stay with him after he was badly injured in a hunting accident, she answers:

...“Who is going to stop me? Who dares to stop me? You?” she wailed, very near to hysteria. “Bah! You think you have the right to play God, just because you are Agbadi? You have wives – they can look after you. You have your slaves – let them mop up your stinking blood!”(p.16).

In this passage which bears a clear feminist message, Emecheta directly questions the god-like image that the patriarchal system gives to men. Indeed, Ona reduces the great Agbadi to a mere child when she observes: "So you are just an ordinary person after all – no, not an ordinary man but a spoilt child who cries when his mother

leaves him"(p.17). Therefore, Ona takes the position of the Other-Subject who makes a reciprocal claim of recognition as a free self and not just a mere object.

Through Ona and Agbadi's relationship, Emecheta gives her perception of how women can relate to men without necessarily being subjugated to them. It can not be considered as a marriage in the traditional sense although both live in a traditional environment. Ona equally loves Agbadi, but since she knows that "her fate would be the same as that of his other women should she consent to become one of his wives"(p.15), she is not ready to sacrifice her freedom.

According to Barbara Christian, the only way for Agbadi to have Ona is to conquer her sexually and make her a mother because this would force her to give up her independence.¹⁵ In fact, Ona's way of looking at Agbadi with defiance creates in him fear which is defined by Jean-Paul Sartre as "the feeling of being in danger before the Other's freedom."¹⁶ This fear leads to "the objectivation of the Other" which is according to Sartre "a defense on the part of my being which, precisely by conferring on the Other a being for me, frees me from my being-for the Other."¹⁷ Hence, to defend himself, Agbadi tries to transform Ona into an object by forcing her to have sex and after that night spent with him, she becomes pregnant. However, we cannot claim that motherhood has really killed her independence because she continues to live in her father's house and refuses wifhood.

Ona's pride and strong personality are highly criticized by her society; different and sometimes contradictory adjectives are used by the people of the tribe to describe her. Much of the definition of womanhood is verbalized primarily by the community represented by Ibuza women who make judgments about what is

considered as normative femininity. She is seen as a stubborn woman who "enjoyed humiliating [Agbadi] by refusing to be his wife"(p.11). In fact, Agbadi failed to impress her with his wealth, status or physical prowess and he was ready to leave all his wives and mistresses to stay with her. By going against the conventions of her society, she is considered as "a rude and egocentric woman who had been spoiled by her father." She is even judged by Agbadi's wives as "a woman who was troublesome and impetuous, who had the audacity to fight with her man before letting him have her: a bad woman"(p.21).

Paradoxically, it seems that it is this same rudeness that attracts Agbadi. Indeed, through Ona, the writer shows that women are not born weak and that femininity does not necessarily contradict with strength and pride which are conventionally considered as male attributes. It is rather society and its rules that lead to the submissiveness and passivity of women. Emecheta equally demonstrates how difficult it was for Ona to construct her identity between the conventions of her society and her special upbringing. Although Ona shows signs of rebellion, her story is set within the context of a tradition in which a woman's primary function is that of being a mother, particularly of sons. Ona must be the "other" if not of a husband, then of a father. In fact, while Ona resists Agbadi's attempt to control her, she accepts to be a biological instrument in the hands of her father to satisfy his need for male children.

After Nnu Ego's birth, Ona dies when she is delivering her second child and this end is open to different interpretations; her people consider it as a punishment which comes from the land of the dead since she has disobeyed her father by moving to

Agbadi's house. Her death is seen by her tribe as the natural end for a woman who has transgressed the laws of her society. Indeed, Ona shows feminist consciousness when she refuses to fit into the traditional conception of women as subordinate members of the community having less power than men. However, we can find some ambiguity in her blind obedience to her father. Ona has enough strength and audacity to resist Agbadi's control, but she seems helpless against Obi Umunna's authority. In order to understand this ambiguity, we need to read her story within its socio-historical context. Ona was living in a traditional African society where patriarchy intruded in every sphere of life, and whoever tried to defy it had little chance to succeed. Moreover, Ona's ability to defy Agbadi comes from her special upbringing for if she had not been treated as a boy by her father, Ona could have never had such power. Hence, we can conclude that Ona remains an extraordinary woman and despite her short life, she has at least known what it is to be a free and self-asserted woman.

Furthermore, it should be noted that despite male's absolute domination, Emecheta accentuates the strength of her Ibuza women characters who are the representatives of traditional Nigerian women. In the scene of Ojebeta's birth in *The Slave Girl*, we may see how strong and courageous the traditional woman was. In fact, a few minutes after having her baby, Umeadi stands on her feet and she even starts running to consult the dibia about her new born girl:

In common with most Ibuza women, she treated the event in a very straightforward manner, requiring none of the modern paraphernalia that now attends the birth of a child. A pregnant Ibuza woman would simply always carry a cooking knife with her, just in case she gave birth to her baby on her way to or from the market or farm. If she were lucky, she might have someone with her who could cut the cord; if not, she

would cut the cord herself, rest a while, put her new baby on her back and thread her way home (p.11).

The strength of the traditional woman is further suggested by her important role in the economic life of Ibuza. The critic Katherine Fishburn describes the status of Nigerian women before their contact with colonialism as follows:

In short, though their responsibilities are different from those of the men, historically, Nigerian women have been considered important members of the community – a status that declined with the advent of missionaries and the colonial administration.¹⁸

In Ibuza, women constitute the core of the rural workforce; they help in farming and almost monopolize trade which is mainly a female activity. There is no separation between public and domestic spheres and the female characters are present in both fields. Ojebeta's mother is present in her house and like most Ibuza women sells kernel oil in the market. Without necessarily glorifying pre-colonial gender relation, the feminist critic Juliana Nfah Abbenyi explains that many African societies were characterized by "flexible" gender systems in which women were not confined to domestic spheres.¹⁹ The setting is used by Emecheta as a literary device to demonstrate that her female characters' existence is not restricted to their homes. Most of the scenes describing Ibuza life take place outdoors and we can see that Ona is compelled to stay home only when Agbadi is ill. Similarly, after the death of her husband, Umeadi "was confined to her hut like a prisoner until her months of mourning were over"(p.22). Emecheta shows again that for a traditional woman, to stay at home all day may be synonymous of "imprisonment" and it is this freedom of movement that was undermined by the colonial rule in Africa. In Ibuza, space is rather open and women share with men settings like the farm and the market which may confirm their participation in the public life of their communities.

Throughout this chapter, we have tried to explain the concept of patriarchy and its implication in the life of traditional Nigerian women. Through the village of Ibuza, Emecheta has exposed an image of a society in which women held a specific set of roles that were considered appropriate to them. In this society of men, polygamy was largely practiced for different reasons notably the need to have sons. With the help of characterization, Emecheta has treated the absolute power of traditional men in the patriarchal system. She portrays her male characters as god-like figures while most of her female characters except Ona, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, are rather flat and inarticulate. Only Ona is given voice when she refuses to accept Agbadi's control and this may suggest how the patriarchal order silenced women who were socialized to believe that they were not particularly "prized creatures". Using de Beauvoir's words, we can conclude that patriarchy has consecrated men's domination by conceiving of women as men's "others" and we can claim that via the character of Ona, Emecheta tried to deconstruct men's absolute power although she remains her father's possession.

Another aspect of traditional Nigerian society is domestic slavery and the next chapter treats the impact of this practice on traditional women and the way Emecheta uses it as a metaphor to represent all forms of oppression that subjugated women.

Notes:

- 1- Frederick Engels. **The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State**(1884). Australia: Resistance Books, 2004,pp.45-88.
- 2- Adrienne Rich. **Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution**. New York: Norton, 1976, pp.55-56.
- 3- Katherine Fishburn. **Reading Buchi Emecheta: Cross Cultural Conversations**. London: Greenwood Press, 1995,p.114.
- 4- C.K.Meek. **The Northern Tribes of Nigeria**. London, 1971,vol 1,p.155.

- 5- Nancy j. Hafkin and Edna G.Bay. **Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change**. Stanford University Press, 1976,p.4.
- 6- Simone de Beauvoir. op.cit., p. xxiii.
- 7- Ibid.
- 8- Ibid., p. xxxv.
- 9- Ibid.
- 10- Barbara Christian. **Black Feminist Criticism**. New York: Pergamon, 1985,p.214.
- * Idu is the mythical name for the empire of Benin.
- 11- Lukes, S. **Power: A Radical View**. London: Macmillan, 1975,p.148, 157, 288, 317.
- 12- Joseph Mahon and Jo Campling. **Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, p. 108.
- 13- Ibid.
- 14- Simone de Beauvoir. op.cit.,p. xxiii.
- 15- Barbara Christian. op.cit., p. 229.
- 16-Jean-Paul Sartre. **Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology**(1943) .(trans. Hazel E Barnes). London: Routledge, 1969,p. 268.
- 17- Ibid.,p.236.
- 18- Katherine Fishburn. op.cit., p.110.
- 19-Julian. M. Nfah Abbenyi. **Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference**. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997,p.24.

Chapter 2:

Women, Slavery, and Traditional Marriage

The slave girl who is buried alive with her mistress is a parable used by Buchi Emecheta in both *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. Different interpretations have been given to this story which denounces the practice of domestic slavery in the traditional Nigerian society. More than exposing slavery as a significant aspect in the history and culture of her country, some feminists like Florence Stratton consider the slave girl as a leitmotif used by Emecheta to reflect traditional women's entrapment by some traditions.

In fact, Florence Stratton identifies the ideology of slavery with patriarchy. She explains that Emecheta's use of the slave girl as an archetypal character in many of her novels symbolizes the chains that any patriarchal culture puts on women. This archetype is represented in *The Joys of Motherhood* by the burial ceremony of Agbadi's senior wife during which a slave is buried alive. For Stratton, the "shallow grave" in which the slave girl is thrown symbolizes the burial of a woman's talents and whole being by the limits of a patriarchal order.¹

The custom among Igbo people was to put in the grave a slave who was buried alive to serve his or her master. It was even believed that "a good slave was supposed to jump into the grave willingly, happy to accompany her mistress"(p.23). A beautiful female slave is chosen among Agbadi's numerous slaves and she is asked to follow her mistress, yet the woman keeps begging for her life. She is violently pushed into "the shallow grave" and Agbadi's eldest son gives her a sharp blow on her head. Before earth is thrown on her and her dead mistress, she promises to come back to Agbadi's household as a "legitimate daughter". Nnu Ego is born with a lump on the back of her head, in the very place where the slave woman had been struck

and for her people, this is an evidence of the slave woman's come back. We find an intertextual link with *The Slave Girl* where Emecheta tells a similar story of an enslaved princess who is buried alive with her mistress. The archetype is that of an oppressed woman who is entrapped in a circle of death and rebirth because the slave woman comes back to the land of the living in the form of a personal god or a *chi*. Hence, the slave girl is a symbol of the perpetuation of women's subjugation by the patriarchal system.

The Slave Girl treats the theme of slavery which was a significant aspect of traditional life through the story of Ogbanje Ojebeta who is sold to slavery by her brother, Okolie. In the novel, the majority of domestic slaves are females and this fact can be explained historically by the value given to women slaves who were easier to capture than men. Moreover, they had the ability to perform a big amount of work both inside and outside the house. It is true that domestic slavery is an African custom that had existed well before the colonization of the continent, but Emecheta equally criticizes the eighteenth century European slave trade, which according to her, aggravated the situation. She recalls "those days when it was easy for the Europeans to urge the chief of a powerful village to wage war on a weaker one in order to obtain slaves for the New World"(p.70). Therefore, domestic slavery was transformed into a lucrative business and many Africans were captured and sent to work in the southern plantations in America.

In the novel, domestic slavery is supposed to be abolished by the British who colonized Nigeria by the late nineteenth century, but Ma Palagada continues to have slaves despite the laws passed by the British to end this human trade. Indeed, after

the death of her parents, Ojebeta is taken by Okolie to the town of Onitsha where a rich cloth trader called Ma Palagada buys her. Before reaching Onitsha, the brother and sister go through a journey which may be contrasted to the first difficult trip made by Ojebeta's father to bring the charms from Idu. However, while the first journey results in the saving of Ojebeta from the evil spirits, the second one leads to her enslavement. According to Deborah MacDowell, the motif of journey that generally characterizes the slave narrative novels, recurs in many black women writers' works. She observes: "The female's black journey... is basically a personal and psychological journey, a state of becoming part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness."² On the contrary, the slave narrative in *The Slave Girl* is subverted because the journey of Ojebeta from Ibuza to Onitsha is not a movement for liberation like that of American black slaves who fled to the North for freedom. In fact, Ojebeta's journey is rather a passage from the freedom of childhood in which she is protected by her parents' love to her physical enslavement by her new masters and the expectations of womanhood.

In addition to the motif of journeying, *The Slave Girl* shares with the slave narrative novel its biographical aspect since it recalls experiences lived by black slaves during the times of plantations in America. The lived experience is equally present in many of Emecheta's works which are either autobiographies like: *Second-Class Citizen*, *In The Ditch* and *Head Above Water* or biographies such as *The Slave Girl*, in which she draws the model for the character of Ojebeta on her own mother and she explains this in her autobiography:

My mother, Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta Emecheta, that laughing, loud-voiced, six foot-tall, black glossy slave girl, who as a child sucked the breasts of her dead mother; my

mother who lost her parents when the nerve gas was exploded in Europe....., forgave a brother that sold her to a relative in Onitsha. My mother, who probably loved me in her own way, but never expressed it, my mother, that slave girl who had the courage to free herself and return to her people in Ibuza, and still stooped and allowed the culture of her people to re-enslave her, and then permitted Christianity to tighten the knot of enslavement.³

In the passage above, Emecheta observes that there are different definitions of slavery which go from the physical or direct enslavement of a person after making a human purchase to the indirect enslavement of an individual by culture, religion and social conventions. In *The Slave Girl*, we can similarly find different forms of slavery; the most evident one is the physical enslavement of Ojebeta who is compelled to stay at Ma Palagada's house and work for her in the market stalls. Moreover, Ojebeta appears as a victim of her culture which allows a brother to sell his own sister because the patriarchal system gives him a complete control over her life. Furthermore, as a colonized subject, Ojebeta was enslaved by the British rule which deprived Nigerian people of their freedom.

Ojebeta's story is set in the colonial rule and this period in the history of Nigeria is described by Abdul JanMohamed as "the dominant" phase of colonialism which corresponds to the direct control of a colonized country through the use of military force⁴. The dominant phase went in Nigeria from the time when the British first came to replace the Portuguese who traded in slaves by the late eighteenth century to the time of independence in the 1960's. Therefore, we can claim that colonialism was, indeed, another form of slavery. Some critics even read the story of Ojebeta as an allegory for the enslavement of her country by the West, and this domination continued even after the independence of Nigeria in the form of economic and political hegemony.⁵ The theme of colonialism and its impact on the female

characters' development will be discussed in further detail in the second part of our dissertation.

Ojebeta is, thus, victim of different oppressing factors: racial, sexual and colonial. Feminism by definition rejects all forms of oppression that silence, marginalize, and hinder women's self-assertion as full individuals having equal rights with men. Looking at the theme of slavery from a feminist angle is to show the way Emecheta relates it to the construction of her female protagonists' identity. Slavery as any other form of oppression kills the human being's individuality because it is based on the idea of "ownership".

Ogbanje Ojebeta loses her identity when she is sold to slavery, and moves from the status of a subject loved and cherished by her parents to an impersonal object that her brother and his relative try to negotiate at a given price. She is considered by her relative as a "human purchase" that she must have at the lowest price possible. The philosopher Hegel made an extensive analysis of the slave/master relationship in his famous work, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegelian philosophy rests on the concept of self-consciousness which is the characteristic that distinguishes human beings from other things. Self-consciousness needs an external object which is another self-consciousness from which it can differentiate itself. A person is aware of him/herself if he or she is aware of something else which is not him/herself. In order to exist, the "self" or the "subject" needs the recognition of an external entity which becomes the "other" or the "object", but this external "object" which is needed to define the "self" is equally seen as a threat and a struggle starts between the "self" which tries to assert itself at the expense of "the other". According to Hegel, the master/slave relationship

is the outcome of a life and death struggle in which the master or "the subject" seeks a reflection of him/herself on another person who is reduced to "an object", or a slave. The conflict ends with one person confirming his being and becoming a master while the other one loses his freedom and accepts to be a slave.⁶ When Ma speaks about her slaves, she explains that they "are not the sons and daughters of real rich human beings like themselves"(p.91); hence, slaves are seen as mere objects in the hands of their owners. Ma is the "subject" who proves her existence by being recognized by another self-consciousness that is a slave. When Ma meets a new slave, her self-consciousness tries to show itself as the "absolute" or the "being-for-self" and seeks recognition of her existence in this person who attempts to resist her. The conflict between the two ends with this person negating his/her independence and recognizing the superiority of Ma who is the master. For Ojebeta, becoming a slave means negating her identity as a free human being; this process is represented by Emecheta through the use of symbols.

When she arrives in Onitsha, Ojebeta is symbolized in the text by a thorn fish freshly caught by a fisherman. Just as Okolie and Ma Palagada were negotiating Ojebeta's "price", the cloth trader Ma Mee and the fisherman were haggling about the money wanted for the fish. The image of the fish "wriggling its body and fighting desperately for air"(p.54) stands for Ojebeta who similarly "wriggled violently in the hands of Chiago, the biggest of the Palagada girls"(p.55). This image reinforces the status of Ojebeta as a commodity for barter and her failed attempt to run away from the Palagada's stall to join her brother is symbolized by the fish's "fruitless struggle to free itself"(p.54).

Another symbol of Ojebeta's loss of identity is represented through the charms which were brought by her loving father because they remind her of her happy childhood. The first thing that Ma Palagada orders when she "purchases" the little girl is to remove her charms and bells in order to separate her from her past. This moment was traumatic for Ojebeta since it marked the end of her freedom and when the blacksmith was removing them, she tried hard to cling to what represented her only link with her individuality:

Chiago looked helplessly at the little girl who was doing her utmost to cling on to her individuality. She did not yet know that no slave retained any identity: whatever identity they had was forfeited the day money was paid for them. She did not wish to rob this child of the small shed of self-respect she still had (p.68).

By secretly retaining those charms, Ojebeta preserves some of her identity as a free human being and it is thanks to these charms that during her long years of servitude, she continues to dream of a possible freedom. Ojebeta "might have lost her identity, but at least she could still hold on to the dream of it"(p.69). Hence, we can think that a dream identity is the only thing Ojebeta may have and throughout the novel, she tries to transform it into a real one. To erase their identities, the slaves' names are changed and only the little Ojebeta is allowed to keep her name. However, like all the other slaves she should "learn to be somebody else"(p.68). From that moment, Ojebeta entered the process of maintaining her individuality and facing the devaluation and violence of her masters who consider her as a commodity. Her charms, tattoos, and name are the only remaining features that identify Ojebeta from the other slave girls who have become anonymous in the town of Onitsha.

In fact, as masters, Ma and Pa Palagada impose their domination on slaves through violence which is exercised mainly by Pa who has a god-like position in the

household. He is recognized as the "subject", or the "being-for-self" by his slaves and he constantly uses power to maintain his superiority. However, this recognition becomes insignificant and unsatisfying for him because it comes from a slave, an object-like and not from a free consciousness. The slaves, on the other hand, work in cloth trade and through this contact with the material world and their ability to transform it by their effort, they become aware of their oppression and the possibility to progress out of the master's hold. According to Hegel, the slave's fear of death in addition to labour lead him/her towards a new self-recognition: "fear, the being-for-self is present in the bondsman himself; in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to him, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right"⁷. Indeed, thanks to her creative work in which simple pieces of cloth are transformed into sophisticated clothes, Ojebeta is aware of her ability to change things. After the death of Ma, Ojebeta seizes the opportunity to free herself and regain an autonomous sense of self. Ojebeta's reaction is explained by de Beauvoir's concept of reciprocity according to which the master is in his turn dependent on his slave. In fact, the 'other' makes a reciprocal claim for recognition and sets himself as the subject.

When Okolie gets to Ma Palagada's stall, he makes the following statement about the Owerri people who married wives, not much older than his little sister: "is it not almost as I am now about to do to my little sister, young as she is – **marry her away to this woman relative?** So why condemn the Owerri people or anyone else who does that kind of thing?"(p.44). [emphasis added]. Selling and marrying off Ojebeta are apparently the same for Okolie because both consist in giving his sister to

somebody else in exchange for money. Okolie could have waited until his sister had grown to and have her bride price which according to Ibuza customs belongs to him, but since he needs the money to organize his "coming-out of age" ceremony, he prefers to sell Ojebeta for eight pounds. Emecheta explicitly makes a link between the patriarchal institution of marriage as it was constructed by the traditional society and the concept of slavery. Slavery may be read as a metaphor for the entrapment of women by the absolute power of husbands after paying the bride price.

In *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta gives the standards established by the traditional society to define what a "good" wife is. When a woman marries in Ibuza, she has to forget all about her previous life the day she moves to her husband's house, but most importantly she has to consider her husband as a "god" and accept his authority.

Describing the status of married women in Ibuza, Emecheta writes:

If a good wife was in trouble of any kind, instead of calling on God to help her she could call out either the name of her husband or the god of her husband's people; certainly not the gods in the huts of her own father, for they should cease to exist for her the day her bride price is paid. From that day she should be loyal to her husband, his gods and his people, in body and spirit (p.3-4).

Indeed, marriage marks the most important event in a woman's life since her identity is reshaped when she moves to live in another man's hut and should prepare herself to behave as her husband wants. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, through the character of Agbadi, Emecheta explains the traditional conception of marriage which perpetuated women's submissiveness:

He married a few women in the traditional sense, but as he watched each of them sink into domesticity and motherhood he was soon bored and would go for further afield for some other exciting, tall, and proud female. This predilection of his extended to his mistress as well (p.10).

The statement above is very important because it expresses the opinion of a character who symbolizes the traditional patriarchal order, yet his ideas about marriage are different. Agbadi acknowledges that domesticity and motherhood may kill a woman's pride and individuality. Moreover, an Ibuza woman is always defined in relation to men whatever status she may have. She is looked down upon by her society if she is not married and this is the case of Ona who is not considered as a "real" woman because she does not belong to a husband.

Many feminists have questioned forms of marriage that view women as mere properties to be exchanged between fathers and husbands. Drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory on kinship and the exchange of women, the feminist critic Nancy C.A. Hartsock denounces the treatment of women as commodities by the patriarchal system. In *Elementary Structure of Kinship*, the philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss analyses kinship and the role marriage played in the establishment of this social system. He shows that kinship departs from the prohibition of incest. Kinship is a social system that mediates between nature and culture and divides the human from the natural world. The creation of kin ties generally through the exchange of women is, in fact, a social reflection on the natural phenomenon of incest. Hence, kinship marks the human being's passage from nature to culture because while incest is a sexual relationship that may exist in natural or biological terms, culture prohibits it in order to secure a social life.

The exchange of women played a crucial role in the formation of communities because it "provides the means of binding men together."⁸ In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Agbadi takes several women from different tribes and these women

were used to end some conflicts. In fact, after a woman is exchanged those who were strangers become close, and the woman exchanged becomes herself part of another lineage. Reading Lévi-Strauss's theory from a feminist perspective, Hartsock holds:

From a feminist standpoint in which the self is understood as relationally defined, as constituted by a complex web of interactions with others, it seems perverse to deny a real connection with others and to argue that community can be constituted only indirectly, that men relate only through the mediation of things, that social relations are created by the act of passing things (most significantly women) back and forth.⁹

For her, women lose all their humanity and appear in his theory as objects by which "human beings communicate and establish social synthesis."¹⁰ Hence, as in the practice concerning commodities, the exchange of women is related to the importance of the object to be exchanged in return for or what is known in many cultures as the bride price.

With a lot of irony, the writer shows that after the transaction, Okolie has remorse since he has sold his sister for half the money he would have had for her when she married. His thoughts go to his older brother, Enuha who has the greatest share in Ojebeta's price:

He had no right to claim any money that his sister might fetch. Now that their father was dead, her bride price when she grew up belonged by right to his older brother Enuha. Okolie's share would have been a pound or so, but now not only had he sold his sister for less than half the price she would later have had for her marriage, he was also keeping all the money for himself (p.77).

In this passage, the narrator shows that marriage conceives of Ojebeta as a commodity in the patriarchal system through the word "price" which is associated with marriage. The critic Chikwenye Ogunyemi observes how Emecheta "exploits the language of commodification implicit in the word *price*" in order to locate "the core of the Nigerian marital problem as bartering/battering."¹¹ Girls were then

brought up to fetch a high bride price and this custom is symbolized by the female characters' names in some of Emecheta's novels. In keeping the image of woman as commodity in *The Bride Price*, Emecheta names the protagonist Aku-nna which means the father's wealth. Like Ojebeta, after the death of her father, Aku-nna is inherited by her greedy uncle who gives her to a man that she does not love in order to obtain her bride price. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Agbadi names his daughter Nnu Ego, "twenty bags of cowries" and if a man wants to marry her, he has to pay this great amount of money.

The practice of the bride price plays an important role in the shaping of Ona's identity because it makes of her an inaccessible woman for Agbadi. It symbolizes her father's control over her life and to have this right Agbadi overtly asks Obi Umunna: "How much do you want for her?"(p.26). Hence, Ona is considered by her society as a commodity that each man tries to control via money. Besides, the dowry being not paid, Ona's children belong to her father. Indeed, the bride price was the material sign that the right of the mother on her children is transferred to the father, for without paying the bride price, the children belong to the mother's family.¹²

Similarly, Nnu Ego's second husband Nnaife asks her: "Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner?"(p.48). The parallel here is clearly made between marriage and slavery because for Nnaife paying the bride price makes of him the owner of his wife just like the Palagada own Ojebeta after they bought her from her brother.

In fact, Emecheta rejects the cultural construction of marriage as a transaction which gives a man the right to consider his wife as a mere property after paying

some money for her. In chapter ten of *The Slave Girl* through the character of Chiago, Emecheta overtly expresses this idea:

Every woman, whether slave or free, must marry. All her life a woman always belonged to some male. At birth you were owned by your people, and when you were sold, you belonged to a new master, when you grew up your new master who had paid something for you would control you (p.113).

By the "new master" Emecheta means a husband since she uses the same word to describe Ojebeta's husband Jacob and we find this link especially in the last chapter when Ojebeta, at last free from slavery, marries a man of her tribe. Paradoxically, this chapter is entitled "*A Slave with a New Master*"; consequently, marriage is constructed as a new form of entrapment because it follows the traditional form which according to Emecheta still includes the idea of ownership. This paradox is expressed by Ojebeta herself who considers her marriage as an exchange of masters: "I feel free in belonging to a new master from my town Ibuza; my mind is now at rest" (p.184). Ojebeta retains her identity as a free Ibuza girl and she refuses to stay in Onitsha while all the other slaves remain there. However, when Ojebeta returns to her village, she allows herself to be enslaved again by the norms and conventions of her society. Ojebeta makes of herself an object in the hands of her husbands, which suggests that a return to her traditions without questioning the status of women is a guarantee for the perpetuation of her enslavement.

Through Agbadi and Ona's relation, Emecheta deconstructs the traditional image of the obedient wife who is almost owned by her husband. The absence of the bride price makes of their relationships, a marriage of equals, which suggests that Emecheta does not necessarily reject marriage. The critic Chandra Mohanty seems to have the same view about marriage. Commenting on Lévi-Strauss's theory on the

exchange of women, she explains that marriage "is in itself not constitutive of the subordination of women; women are not subordinate because of the fact of exchange, but because of the modes of exchange instituted, and the value attached to these modes."¹³ The practice of the bride price is one of these modes of exchange which leads to the objectification of women by their husbands.

Through the character of Ma Palagada, Emecheta gives another example of the traditional married woman status. Although it is perfectly accepted that traditional women contributed to domestic earnings, Ma Palagada is the only provider of the family. Her husband prefers to stay home and indulge himself in drinking and using his slaves as sexual playthings. Ma Palagada is a powerful woman who has challenged her society by having a love affair with a Portuguese who before leaving Nigeria, gave her a great deal of wealth which helped to develop her trade. However, despite this economic independence and success, Ma is subdued by her authoritarian husband.

All the toil is put on this woman's shoulders while Pa enjoys himself at home. In addition to this economic exploitation, Pa Palagada has sexual intercourse with one of his slaves. Ma pretends to ignore everything about her husband's adultery, but as a traditional woman she has to accept it. While the financial autonomy which was gained after the Second World War by the European women helped their emancipation, it did not change African women's status.

In this chapter, we have tried to demonstrate that Emecheta does not treat the theme of slavery just as a phase in the history of Nigeria. She tries to use it as an umbrella to cover all forms of oppression that may kill a human being's freedom and

individuality; thus, her text can be open to various interpretations. Emecheta criticizes forms of marriage which entrapped women and made of them second-class citizens by consecrating the husband's control over his wife through the practice of the bride price. In the next chapter, our concern is to look at the theme of motherhood and its importance for women's self-realization.

Notes

1- See. Florence Stratton. *"The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction"* .In. Marie Umeh (ed). **Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta**. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996,p.95-124.

2-Deborah McDowell. **"The changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory**. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995,p14.

3-Buchi Emecheta. **Head above Water: An Autobiography**. London:Fontana Paperbacks,1986,p.3.

4- Abdul R. JanMohamed. *"The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature"*.In. H.L.Gates, Jr (ed).**"Race" Writing and Difference**. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986, p.81.

5- The critic Modupe Olaogun, for example, reads Emecheta's use of slavery as a metaphor for the enslavement of her country by Europe. Indeed, after their independence, many African nations found many difficulties to fly with their own wings after long years of colonialism and if their political independence from Europe was complete by the late 1970's, their economic autonomy was far from being regained. To show the disillusionment that followed independence, Emecheta uses slavery as "an antithesis of independence and of the rights to personal liberty" because even after their liberation, African people were indirectly "enslaved" by Europe. See. Modupe Olaogun. *"Slavery and Etiological Discourse in the Writing of Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta"*. In. Abiola Irele (ed) **Research in African Literatures**. Indiana: Indiana University Press,vol.33 N.2. 2002,pp.172-193.

6-Hegel. G.W.F. **Phenomenology of Spirit** (1807). (trans. A.V.Miller). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977,pp.111-119.

7- Ibid., p.119.

8-Claude Lévi-Strauss. **The Elementary Structure of Kinship**(1949). (trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard Von Strumer and Rodney Needham .eds). Boston: Beacon Press, 1969,p.480.

9- Nancy. C. Hartsock. **The Feminist Standpoint Revisited**. Colorado: Westview Press, 1998.p183.

10- Ibid.

11- Chikwenje Okonjo Ogunyemi. op.cit., p. 245.

12- Barbara Christian. op.cit., p.216.

13- Chandra. T. Mohanty. "*Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*". In Padimini Mongia (ed). **Contemporary Postcolonial Theory**. London: Arnold, p.17.

Chapter 3:

Asserting Selfhood Through Motherhood

In the patriarchal society of Ibuza where male descendants are highly valued, mothers play a crucial role because of their capacity to procreate. In fact, we can never disassociate the life of traditional women from motherhood which in addition to marriage were important institutions. Therefore, it becomes evident that the study of the traditional status of women in Nigeria may be incomplete if one does not throw light on the mother image in Emecheta's novels. This image is particularly present in *The Joys of Motherhood* and it seems that like many African women writers, Emecheta wants to demonstrate the value of motherhood for African women, and the role it played in the shaping of their identity.

In many of her interviews, Buchi Emecheta repeatedly declares that she was highly influenced by the Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa¹, which can explain the intertextual link that we find between the title of her novel *The Joys of Motherhood* and the last lines of Nwapa's most popular work *Efuru*. Nwapa closes her novel with these lines: "She had never experienced the joys of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?." ² However, the word "joys" in Emecheta's novel is rather used in an ironical way because she traces the miseries experienced by the central character, Nnu Ego, as a result of the idealization of motherhood. The story of Nnu Ego is in reality a tragedy with more sufferings than "joys".

The novel opens with a chapter entitled "The Mother" in which we see Nnu Ego running like a mad person through the streets of 1930's Lagos. Her breasts are dripping with milk as she makes her way through the passers by who try to prevent her from committing suicide. We learn subsequently that the reason for her hysterical behaviour is the loss of her first baby. Describing Nnu Ego, Emecheta writes:

Her baby...her baby! Nnu Ego's arms involuntarily went to hold her aching breast, more for assurance of her motherhood than to ease their weight. She felt the milk trickling out, wetting her buba blouse; and the other choking pain got heavier, nearing her throat, as if determined to squeeze the very life out of her there and then. But unlike the milk, this pain could not come out, though it urged her on, and she was running away from it. Yet it was there inside her. There was only one way to rid herself of it. For how would she be able to face the world after what had happened? No, it was better not to try. It was best to end it all this way, the only good way (p.8).

Drawing on Adrienne Rich's definition of motherhood, we can distinguish here between two dimensions of motherhood: one that is biological and the other cultural.³ The success of patriarchy, is that it has institutionalized biological motherhood, i.e men have convinced women that unless a woman is mother, she is naturally a woman. Motherhood is defined as the biological capacity of a woman to procreate and this is represented in the text by Nnu Ego's aching breasts. Full of milk, her breasts are the biological sign of her previous pregnancy. The second is the conception of motherhood as an institution having its cultural and social values. In fact, Nnu Ego feels a strong pain that almost kills her because she fails to be a mother. Rather than thinking of her dead baby, Nnu Ego worried about "how to face the world after what had happened." By the "world", Emecheta probably means society which would condemn Nnu Ego for her inability to secure the continuity of her husband's lineage. Therefore, motherhood is presented here as an institution that culturally defines womanhood essentially as motherhood and since she does not respect this equation, Nnu Ego feels guilty. The only way for her to get rid of this guilt is to kill herself. Nnu Ego's suicide is a case of being-for-others because it is the easy way to escape anxiety, guilt and pain.

Through this powerful scene, Emecheta demonstrates the impact of motherhood on the psyche of her protagonist. Some feminists like the critic Nfah-Abbenyi have

explored the psychological implications of childbearing on the shaping of Nnu Ego's identity; she observes: "motherhood is so ingrained in women's psyche that the alternative to the loss of a child is the loss of self, of gender and of identity."⁴

Motherhood as a cultural institution varies from one community to the other and it is important to investigate how it was viewed by the traditional society in which Nnu Ego evolves. According to the critic Katherine Fishburn, most western feminists come to understand that "motherhood is not as deeply valued in the west as it is in Africa."⁵ Therefore, when approaching this theme in African literary works, this difference is to be taken into consideration. In fact, most traditional societies constructed motherhood as a myth and this can explain the reason for the idealization of this role. The philosopher Cheik Anta Diop, for example, explains that Africa was initially a mother-centered society, that the first civilizations in Africa were created by a mother goddess, and finally that this idyllic image was disturbed when men started to wage wars to resist Nomadic invasions.⁶ Indeed, many African ethnic groups like the Gikuyu of Kenya believe that their communities were initially matriarchies and in order to impose their control, men caused a widespread pregnancy to weaken women and end up this matriarchy.⁷

The idealization of motherhood was further consecrated when the mother figure started to be used by African male writers in their works. In fact, during the early 1960's, most male writers called for the valorization of Africa's pre-colonial past. This tendency to praise traditions was reflected through some images of women notably those of mothers to symbolize the purity of their countries before their colonization by Europe. The Senegalese poet Leopold Sédar Senghor is particularly

known for his use of a mother figure to represent Africa as a land of beauty and fecundity. The symbolic aspect of the portrayal of women in early African literature by male writers was criticized by some African feminists. Florence Stratton, for example, explains that the mother Africa becomes a trope through which men writers praise African black culture. For Stratton, the conception of female characters as analogues of traditions has worked against the interest of women because it led to their imprisonment in the traditional roles assigned to them by society and which consisted exclusively of wifehood and motherhood. The idealization of the African pre-colonial past contributed to the perpetuation of the status quo in which traditional women were living.⁸ This view is equally shared by the critic Barbara Christian who observes: "Until very recently, most African male writers have portrayed woman as the idealized life force rather than focusing on the reality of her subordinate role in African societies."⁹ When African women writers entered the literary scene, they wanted to question this tradition of perpetually idealizing motherhood. They tried to represent motherhood from a different angle by portraying it as an experience lived by African women and not as a metaphor or symbol for something else. Motherhood is treated by Emecheta as an experience lived by Nnu Ego and the study of this character will allow us to have a complete understanding of this institution.

Although her mother dies when she is still a baby, Nnu Ego has a rather happy childhood with a father who loves her more than all his other children. When she reaches the age of sixteen, she marries one of the most handsome men of her tribe. Her marriage ceremony is a big show of her father's wealth so much so that everybody in Ibuza starts to envy the new husband Amatokwu for such a bride. But

this envy soon turns into disappointment when the months pass and Nnu Ego's womb remains empty. From that moment in the novel, Emecheta starts to use the term "failure" when she describes Nnu Ego to show that for a traditional society like the Ibuza one, a woman who can not bear children is automatically seen as a "failed woma."

The impact of this failure to procreate is dramatic on Nnu Ego's both physical and mental health; she becomes very thin and highly depressed. She even starts to hate herself and puts all the blame on her side without even questioning her husband's fertility. According to Ibuza people, only women are responsible for sterility and this can explain Nnu Ego's answer when her husband asks her about her pregnancy: "I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right. How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed?" (p.31). Nnu Ego's sense of guilt comes from the pressure exercised by her society which starts to question her womanhood. After visiting the "dibia" of her village, Nnu Ego is told that the reason of her infertility comes from the land of the spirits who were taking revenge. The spirit in question is that of the slave woman who was buried alive with Agbadi's senior wife and who became later Nnu Ego's "chi". Consequently, many sacrifices are made to appease this spirit, but the situation does not change.

Although she belongs to a high class as the daughter of a powerful and rich chief, Nnu Ego is despised by her husband because of her sterility; thus, whatever status a woman may have, she is condemned by her society if she fails to have children. After some months, her family-in-law starts to look for a new wife for Amatokwu

and Nnu Ego has no choice but to accept polygamy which is a common practice in this patriarchal society.

This obsession with the imperative necessity of having children comes from a strong belief among African people that when a person dies, his or her spirit remains on earth if a living son remembers him or her and makes sacrifices for the spirit of the dead.¹⁰ The perpetuation of a man's name is of a great importance; it is the evidence that this man has well existed one day. This belief has worked against the interest of women since it made of motherhood and childbearing obligations and not choices. More than that, the critic Nfah Abenyi explains that mothers of girls were not as valued as mothers of boys:

The major problem for African women will not necessarily reside in control over their bodies or motherhood as such, but with a combination of other interrelated issues, such as discriminatory cultural and patriarchal practices that give better socio-economic or political status to mothers, especially mothers of sons as opposed to mothers of daughters.¹¹

Having no time to waste on a sterile woman, Amatokwo takes a second wife who within a short time becomes pregnant. Nnu Ego is easily replaced by another wife because she does not fulfill her role and is asked to move to another hut kept for "old" wives. Consequently, a girl of seventeen becomes an "old" wife because she cannot have children. The following remark put in the mouth of Nnu Ego's husband confirms the idealization of sons and the centrality of a woman's reproductive role for the traditional society of Ibo. He says: "I have no time to waste my precious male seeds on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line..... But now if you can't produce sons, at least you can help harvest yams"(p.32-33).

We note here that he uses the term "male" for his descendants and this demonstrates how the need to have sons is so ingrained in his culture so that his line is secured. In this passage, there is also a materialist-feminist approach which links gender to economy. In fact, Emecheta puts the words "sons" and "yams" on the same scale, to accentuate a materialistic view of motherhood in which woman is essentially defined as a "producer" of male children.

Therefore, securing the continuity of a community is another reason for the idealization of motherhood in the traditional Nigerian society. For a long time women's identity has been shaped by their ability to have children. A woman's duty towards her society is to give birth to male descendants who would perpetuate the cultural and historical heritage of their communities. Polygamy was often justified by the necessity to have many children.

African feminists have always been faced with the problem of how to assert the individual feminine self in a society where community links are so important. In the suicide scene, the passers-by help Nnu Ego because for them "an individual's life belongs to the community and not just to him or her. So a person has no right to take it while another member of the community looks on"(p.60). Nnu Ego's sufferings come mostly from a feeling that she has failed to do her duty towards her community and when she realizes that she cannot have children, her first thoughts go to her father. She is sorry for disappointing him and most of her reflections are centered on her father's despair. Nnu Ego thinks: "The poor man suffers more than I do. It is difficult for him to accept the fact that anything that comes from him can be imperfect. I will not return to his house as a failure" (p.33).

Emecheta stresses again the sense of guilt that Nnu Ego has and she even believes that her father's pain is greater than hers. Agbadi is the representative of his community and the fact that he suffers more than his daughter may lead the reader to think that motherhood is given more importance by the community than by the individual. In fact, Nnu Ego's problem of sterility would have been less difficult to bear if her society had not perceived it as a sign of failure and imperfection.

In this novel, Emecheta equally demonstrates how a woman's body is defined only through pregnancy and child bearing. Accordingly, the critic Nfah Abbenyi holds: "the women's body has no *raison d'être* when it cannot fulfill its procreative function."¹² Indeed, Nnu Ego feels that she is inferior to other women because her body can not conceive children.

The body and its significance for women's self-assertion is a concern that has attracted most feminists' attention starting with Simone de Beauvoir. For her, the body reflects the ambiguity of the human beings' existence. It is an instrument of transcendence since it is "our grasp on the world," it is "the radiation of subjectivity, the instrument that makes possible the comprehension of the world."¹³ In other words, the body allows us to make concrete projects and transform the external world; hence, to transcend the limits of the present and project ourselves in the future. However, the body as flesh can link the human being to immanence because it can be vulnerable to biological limitation such as illnesses which reduce the human subject to living in the present; moreover, the body can be taken as a thing or object by the other.¹⁴ Before, her experience with motherhood, Nnu Ego sees her body as the straightforward expression of her individuality; an instrument endowed with

power that can change the external world. By contrast, when she marries and fails to have children, she realizes the biological limitation of her body which becomes pure flesh. Because she is "apprehended by the other as an object, [her] body in effect becomes an object that alienates [her] from [herself]."¹⁵ Gradually, Nnu Ego starts to hate her body because it has deceived her: "In the privacy of her hut, she would look at herself all over. She would feel her body, young and firm like that of any other young woman. She knew that soft liquid feeling of motherhood was lacking"(p.32). When the body is seen only as flesh whose only role is to procreate, it becomes impossible for a woman to transcend her biological fate.

Nnu Ego is victim of a biological determinism in which the feminine self is seen from a purely biological perspective leaving little room for this self to exist as an individual if she is not first a mother. In the society of Ibuza, where Nnu Ego spends her early life, motherhood is deeply inscribed and women are socialized to idealize childbearing and perceive their roles as mothers as the only way to reach self-fulfillment.

Most feminists have strongly rejected the definition of a woman's identity only in biological terms. In other words, it is unacceptable for them to define womanhood essentially through motherhood because this would mean that prior to being a mother, a woman does not exist as a woman. Moreover, if a woman cannot or simply refuses to be a mother she spends all her life without achieving her gender identity as a woman. The feminist critic Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie equally observes: "woman biology is indeed an important and necessary aspect of her but it is not all she is and

should not be used to limit her."¹⁶ Therefore, motherhood is problematic when it becomes the sole identity that a woman can have.

It is interesting to examine the language used by Emecheta to describe the way Nnu Ego is perceived by her society when her infertility becomes evident. The writer employs a set of very strong and recurrent adjectives like: imperfect, failed, dry, juiceless, infertile and even barren as a desert. Just like her mother, Nnu Ego is severely judged by her society which verbalizes the definition of womanhood as wifedom and motherhood.

Despite all these hardships, Nnu Ego accepts to remain in her husband's compound and prays her "chi" to help her. When her co-wife gives birth to a baby boy, the status of Nnu Ego worsens dramatically. She becomes insignificant for her husband who humiliates her when he says: "If you really want to know, you don't appeal to me any more. You are dry and jumpy"(p32). Amatokwu prefers to have sexual intercourse with his second wife whom he considers as "a real" woman since she has become a mother. Nnu Ego, on the other hand, is abandoned by her husband who accepts to visit her hut only after his second wife has delivered her baby. Nnu Ego is seen as an impersonal sexual object which is used only to satisfy a man's sexual desire.

Here again the writer shows the centrality of motherhood for this society since even sexuality depends on it, a view expressed by the critic Barbara Christian who holds: "motherhood not sexual intercourse, is the seal of marriage in Ibo society."¹⁷ It seems that the first aim of any sexual act between a man and his wife is the procreation of children and if a woman is sterile, there is no need for such relation.

Nnu Ego does not appeal to her husband since she is infertile which means that in a patriarchal society sex and gender roles are constructed as the same. After failing to be a mother, Nnu Ego cannot claim any of her rights as a wife.

Nnu Ego continued to accept this humiliation and her only refuge was her hut where she could take care of the new born baby. These were rare moments of compensation for her and the joy that she experienced when she started to breast-feed the baby was great. Breast-feeding the baby was the psychological substitute for the feeling of mothering and this was necessary for her psychological balance since it provided her with "some of the fulfillment for which she yearned"(p.33). She was extremely surprised when she saw milk dripping out of her breasts, which suggests that her body was responding to her subconscious. In her psyche, by feeding the baby Nnu Ego has become a mother without biologically bearing this child and her body was reflecting this feeling through this milk.

Emecheta is presenting here an image of motherhood that may contradict Simone de Beauvoir's view of maternity as a burden. Because of her capacity to procreate, de Beauvoir explains that "the female organism is wholly adapted for and subservient to maternity.....The female is the victim of the species". Pregnancy is presented as a period of alienation for woman who "becomes, in part, another than herself"¹⁸ and when fertilization has occurred, woman's organism's rebellion is indicated through the loss of appetite during the first months of pregnancy and frequent vomiting. These aspects are the physiological signs of the burden of maternity which had historically doomed women to immanence because a pregnant woman becomes weak and dependent on men. De Beauvoir's image of female reproduction and birth as an

alienating experience may not correspond to Emecheta's representation of motherhood. Although Nnu Ego is not a mother yet, breast-feeding appears as a self-healing experience which provides her with the same joy that she will feel with each of her future pregnancies. At no moment in the novel, Nnu Ego is alienated from her body because she is pregnant and her sufferings rather come from her people's over-idealization of motherhood as a cultural and social institution, a belief that Nnu Ego continues to hold on to it.

Motherhood is presented in this part of the novel as a source of satisfaction. The relationship a woman has with her baby is shown as highly sacred and complex. Although the baby is not Nnu Ego's, a special tie is born between the two. Emecheta demonstrates that motherhood should not be reduced to a mere biological act of producing descendants; it is a much more sacred experience. Moreover, the writer proves that a woman is capable of experiencing the feeling of mothering without giving birth to a child; hence, Nnu Ego is not as "imperfect" and "failed" as she is seen by her society. Emecheta shows again that the biological aspect is not the only side of maternity. Motherhood is rather represented as a feeling of love that any woman can have no matter whether she is biologically capable of childbearing or not, and no one can deprive a woman of this feeling.

However, Nnu Ego's secret of breast-feeding the baby is very soon discovered by her husband who reacts very violently. He beats her heavily and calls for her father to take her back to his house. His excessive reaction can neither be understood nor justified because Nnu Ego has not committed any offense. Her only guilt was to consider the baby of her own husband as her son and by doing so, she tried to steal

some moments of fulfillment that a mother can have when feeding her baby. We can think that this incident was used by Amatokwo to get rid of a "useless" and "barren" woman like Nnu Ego and the marriage is soon broken after Agbadi repays her bride price.

This extremely difficult experience with motherhood is going to have drastic effects on the shaping of Nnu Ego's identity. Her failure in the eyes of her society will affect her conception of motherhood and her knowledge of herself as a woman. Motherhood turns into a real obsession for her. In fact, Nnu Ego's self-esteem as a woman has been completely destroyed by a society which reduced her to nothingness because of her childlessness. In order to regain her femininity, Nnu Ego has to be a mother and for this, she has to move to the town of Lagos where her new husband Nnaife is waiting for her.

When Nnu Ego leaves her traditional village, she has a set of beliefs which include an over-idealization of motherhood as a result of her traumatic experience. Moreover, this process of displacement from the traditional rural village of Ibuza to the urban setting of Lagos is experienced by Nnu Ego as a real shock. She is first shocked by a husband who, according to the standards of Ibuza looks like a middle-aged woman, yet she accepts to live with this man that she hates in the sole hope of becoming a mother. We find here again the notion of self sacrifice to fit the social construction of womanhood. Nnu Ego's fear of bringing disgrace to her family in Ibuza makes her abandon the idea of leaving Nnaife and returning home since she has decided to achieve her dream and become a mother.

When she arrives in Lagos, Nnu Ego makes a strange dream that can be interpreted in different ways. As in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, dreams that communicate supernatural directives to the protagonists are central to *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego dreams of her "chi" and this dream is going to alter all her life:

...She dreams that her chi was handing her a baby boy by the banks of the Atapko stream in Ibuza. But the slave woman had mocking laughter on her lips. As she tried to wade across the stream to take the baby from her, the stream seemed to swell and the woman's laughter rang out in the dense forest. Nnu Ego stretched out her arms several times, and would almost have touched the baby, had not the stream suddenly become deeper and the woman risen to a higher level. "Please. Nnu Ego cried, "Please let me have him, Please (p.45).

The critic Maggi Phillips believes that Emecheta uses this dream as a symbolic irony¹⁹. Nnu Ego, who is the daughter of a slave owner, is in this dream pleading and praying the same slave that her father killed. For Phillips, this dream is to be interpreted as a prophecy for the kind of life that Nnu Ego is going to have in Lagos. Owners of slaves become themselves enslaved by the white man.

Moreover, the mocking laugh of her "chi" can be interpreted as a message from a woman who is trying to tell her that her obsession with children is not the way to reach self-fulfillment. Therefore, the "chi" can be considered as the feminist voice through which Emecheta questions the dominant tradition of motherhood. According to the critic Nana Wilson-Tagoe, through this figure Emecheta uses a conceptual language that reinterprets the patriarchal values:

...we can actually claim that [the "chi"] disrupts the conceptual hold of traditions and beliefs that have construed masculine desire in universal terms. As a spirit she has the power to control and manipulate events on earth. In refusing to give Nnu Ego children in the traditional village of Ibuza, she not only calls the dominant tradition of motherhood into question but also indirectly exposes their class and gender bias. Her dream messages to Nnu Ego work consistently to subvert constructed notions of motherhood even though Nnu Ego herself constantly misinterprets their meaning.²⁰

After this dream, Nnu Ego becomes pregnant and this was "the greatest joy of [her] life" (p.50). However, this "joy" is broken by a husband who does not care for this pregnancy. He even considers it as a problem because he may lose his job as a white man's servant if they have this baby without being married in the Christian church. Emecheta is very ironical in transforming Nnu Ego's "raison d'être" that is motherhood into a problem that may drive her and her husband to poverty. Therefore, Nnu Ego is confronted with a great change in Igbo values from a traditional to a modern-life style in Lagos. The idealization of the mother role that she has always tried to reach is nullified in this new society and even reduced to a banal thing by her husband. He observes: "What do you want me to do? How many babies are born in this town everyday?"(p.51). Being a mother is not such an exceptional achievement for which a woman is congratulated. Her husband's cold and indifferent reaction is the first disillusion that Nnu Ego confronts, but this does not change her convictions that when she becomes a mother of sons, she will be rewarded.

Nnu Ego grew up in a society where the communal spirit prevailed. Children and especially sons were supposed to take care of their parents in their old age. It is the fear of remaining alone in her old age that animates Nnu Ego and makes her idealize sons. Nnu Ego remains faithful to her traditions and when she gives birth to her first baby, she is sure that "her old age would be happy, that when she died there would be somebody left behind to refer to her as a 'mother' "(p.54). Her experience in this town will teach her to adopt a rather realistic opinion about motherhood and learn

that being a mother of sons is not necessarily the guarantee of a happy and comfortable life.

When her husband makes her pregnant, the only thing Nnu Ego can do is to accept living with him. She says: "He has made me into a real woman -- all I want to be, a woman and a mother"(p.53). But this child dies and when we see her in the first chapter trying to commit suicide, we can understand that her hysterical behaviour is, in fact, far from being exaggerated. The loss of this child symbolizes for her, the death of Nnu Ego, the "real" woman who becomes again a "failed woman". In the fifth chapter entitled "*Failed Woman*", the writer comes back to the scene of suicide to show that for Nnu Ego, the alternative to a life without a child is death. Nnu Ego makes a second dream in which her "chi" accepts this time to give her many babies, but these babies were "dirty".

When Nnu Ego comes to this city, she thinks that she is going to be a mother and find the happiness that she has longed for when she was in Izuza. However, the critic Maggi Phillips explains that dreams of compensation which were supposed to come with motherhood are replaced by a slave woman "chi" who offers "dirty" babies suggesting that Nnu Ego will, indeed, face a "catalogue of disasters."²¹ The dream is realized when Nnu Ego is pregnant again and this time her baby survives.

Motherhood is treated by Emecheta as another important factor in the shaping of African women's identity. This theme is represented in *The Joys of Motherhood* through the story of the main character Nnu Ego whose life is centered on her role of mother. She is a woman who is socialized by her traditional society to idealize motherhood and when she fails, her society condemns her. Emecheta uses the story

of Nnu Ego to reject the essentialist definition of womanhood as motherhood and shows that the biological capacity of women to bear children should not be considered as the only aspect of a woman's identity. The writer shows that motherhood is a real source of joy for women, but it becomes problematic when it is constructed as the only identity a woman can have, that is when childbearing becomes the only evidence of womanhood.

Notes

- 1- See, for example, Adeola James(ed). **In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk**. London: James Currey, 1990,pp.36.
- 2- Flora Nwapa. **Efuru**. London: Heinemann, 1966, p.221.
- 3- Adrienne Rich. op. cit., p.13.
- 4- Juliana Makushi Nfah Abbenyi. **Gender in African Women's Writing**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997,p.39.
- 5- Katherine Fishburn. op.cit.,p.106.
- 6- Cheik Anta Diop. **The African Origin of Civilization**. (trans. And ed. Mercer Cook). Westpoint: Lawrence Hill and Co, 1974,pp.143-145.
- 7- The Gikuyu who represent a large ethnic group in Kenya, believe that in the remote past, Kenya was ruled by powerful women leaders. The myth tells that the Gikuyu men were not satisfied with their status and wanted to destroy this matriarchy by causing a widespread pregnancy. Men knew that in pregnancy women are weak; hence, collective impregnancy allowed them to end up this matriarchy. See, for example, Ali.A.Mazrui. *"The Black Woman and the Problem of Gender"*.In **Research in African Literatures**, Vol.24, No.1, Indiana University Press, 1993,p.95.
- 8- See Florence Stratton. **Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender**. London: Routledge, 1994,pp.39-55.
- 9- Barbara Christian. op. cit., p. 218.
- 10- See. John Mbiti. **African Religion and Philosophy**. New York: Doubledge Anchor, 1970.
- 11- Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi. op. cit., p.25.
- 12- Ibid.
- 13- Simone de Beauvoir. op. cit., p. 267.

- 14- Ibid.
- 15- Ibid., p.268.
- 16- Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie. *"The Female Writer and her Commitment"*. In Eldred Jones (ed). **African Literature Today**.No.15. London: James Currey, 1987,p.5.
- 17- Barbara Christian. op. cit.,p.240.
- 18- Simone de Beauvoir. op. cit., p. 32.
- 19-Maggi Phillips. *"Engaging Dreams: Alternative Perspectives on Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo ,Bessie Head and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Writing"*.In.Abiola Irele (ed).**Research in African Literature**. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994,p.94.
- 20- Nana Wilson-Tagoe and Michael Worton (eds). **National Health in a Cross-Cultural Context**. London: Routledge, 2004, p.61.
- 21- Maggi Philips. op. cit., p.94.

Part two

Modernity and its Impact on Traditional Women

Chapter 1:

Colonialism, Urban Life and Economic Changes

At this stage of our research, we have seen that Emecheta tried to throw light on the status of African women living in a traditional matrix. Her aim was to understand the traditional society in an attempt to show how some of its components shaped women's identity notably their roles as wives and mothers in the patriarchal system. The next step is to demonstrate how the status of these women changed when they were displaced to a modern context. By modernity we mean mainly life in an urban environment where new elements came to alter the traditional life.

During the colonial era in Nigeria, the city was the place where the British rule was more apparent. Urban centers such as Lagos, Zaria and Calabar were founded by the British administration and developed rapidly around transportation, trade and administration.¹ Many Nigerian people left their villages and farms to join the town and work for the British families living there; therefore, these urban centers became a theatre for the clash between the values of African and European cultures. The rapid pace of life, industrialization, urbanism, new religion and language were all changes that the Nigerian people who moved there had to integrate into their traditional life. Emecheta takes her two protagonists to this environment of change to question the traditional status of Nigerian women. The new economic, social and cultural values of the city under colonialism reshaped the African identity as well as women's existence.

The coexistence between African traditions and the changes brought by colonialism is a concern that was widely explored in many African literary works. In literature, this clash between the "old" and the "new" has been expressed by some African writers through the village/city dichotomy. The rural areas were generally

places where a little change occurred in comparison with the cities. Buchi Emecheta has equally resorted to the same dichotomy to show this clash in the life of the two main characters, Nnu Ego and Ojebeta.

In *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta is brought by her brother to the market town of Onitsha where she experiences slavery while in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego was sent to Lagos to meet her husband in the hope of removing the stigma of barrenness from her. Through this salient change in the protagonists' life, Emecheta puts some values of her traditional Nigerian society into question especially polygamy, patriarchy and the traditional idealization of motherhood.

Most of the changes that happened to Nnu Ego and Ojebeta are direct or indirect consequences of the colonization of Nigeria by the British. Therefore, in order to understand these changes it is necessary to start with the study of this theme in both novels. However, it is important to stress that like most African women writers, Emecheta tries to show colonialism through the eyes of her female characters and the way it has affected their development in the novels.

The British started to expand their rule over the Nigerian land in the 1880's. The reader of *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood* can have a complete image of the Nigerian society and all the transformations related to colonialism since they cover a great part of the colonial period in Nigeria starting from the 1900's to the end of the Second World War.

Emecheta demonstrates in these two novels that African women suffered from double fold oppression because they were victims of a patriarchal system in which men were the leaders of society and with colonialism, they experienced poverty and

exploitation. The critic Barbara Christian uses the expression "two colonialisms" to describe the situation of African colonized women. By "two colonialisms" Christian means "the domination of their people by the West, and the domination of themselves by their men"². This situation was experienced by Nnu Ego and Ojebeta whose lives were shaped by these two forms of power: patriarchy and colonialism.

It is interesting to note that the two protagonists have little contact with the British, but their life is highly affected by this colonial authority. Indirectly, the two characters' stories are shaken by the colonial rule and it seems that a great deal of their sufferings is to be related to it.

In *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta's life takes a turning point when she becomes a slave. Although slavery was an African custom that existed well before the European colonization of her country, Ojebeta's slavery is partly caused by the British. In fact, if Okolie had the absolute authority over his sister, it is because their parents died and this death was caused by the colonizer. As many Igbos, Ojebeta's parents were victims of felenza which spread in Nigeria after the German, who were at war with the British, blew poisonous gas into the air. By "killing" her parents, the colonizer contributed to Ojebeta's tragedy because she was left alone with her greedy brother who betrayed his duty as a "little father" and preferred to sell his own little sister. In this sense, we can claim that Ojebeta is victim of both the authority of her brother and the British colonizer.

The same can be said about Nnu Ego who under the British rule experienced poverty and hunger when she settled in the city of Lagos. Her husband Nnaife was

taken by force to join the British army fighting the Germans in the Second World War and during his absence, Nnu Ego was left alone with a whole family to feed.

In the Igbo village of Ibuza, the colonial authority does not appear as a strong feature of traditional life. Except for some changes such as the establishment of a court of justice and the Christian church, the writer does not mention important transformations in the characters' lives. However, when Nnu Ego and Ojebeta move to the city, they begin to feel the influence of the British and we can note that from that moment in the novels, Emecheta starts to use slavery as an analogy for their status as colonized subjects.

When Nnu Ego first moves to Lagos, she is shocked by the way men were enslaved by the British. According to Nfah Abbenyi, colonialism led to an inversion of the traditional power relations because traditional Nigerian men who used to have the monopoly of power became themselves mastered by a superior authority represented by the whites.³ One of Nnu Ego's neighbours, Cordelia whose husband works as a cook for a British family describes the situation as follows:

Men here (Lagos) are too busy being white men's servant to be men...Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is the money shining, white men's money...***They are all slaves, including us***...The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work, instead of having been bought (p.51). [emphasis added].

This passage confirms Emecheta's use of slavery to represent colonialism since she uses the term "slaves" to qualify the colonized Nigerian men as well as women. Indeed, they had the status of slaves because they worked at the service of the whites for a meager salary. It is equally interesting to see that this statement is made by a woman, which reinforces the idea that Emecheta wants to depict the colonial

experience as it was lived by women. We can notice also that these characters had a very limited contact with the colonizers except at the church. In fact, many African women felt the influence of the colonizer through their men. Ojebeta's only contact with the British was through her father who worked in the court of justice and later through Ma and Pa Palagada who traded in cloth. The only white person she knew was Mrs Simpson who ran a small academy to teach African girls English manners. For Nnu Ego, the situation was very similar for even though she was living in the same house with Mr and Mrs Meers, she had never exchanged a word with them. Surprisingly, Nnu Ego's hatred went to Mrs Meers and not to her husband because she cannot stand the idea of a woman mastering Nnaife.

In both novels, Emecheta represents the colonial rule through the patronizing liberal white woman whose "burden" is to enlighten the "underdeveloped" subject. Mrs Simpson in *The Slave Girl* and Mrs Meers in *The Joys of Motherhood* are used by Emecheta to question the Western view that African women's status improved after their contact with colonialism. The critic Patrick Colm Hogan explains the colonizer's ideology as follows:

It remains part of the liberal ideology of the West that European women are more liberated than non-European women, that white women can provide a model to African, Arab, and Asian women, who otherwise might not think of seeking liberation.⁴

The character of Mrs. Simpson functions in the novel as the European model to imitate. Her husband was the new United African Company chief and thanks to his position, she convinces Ma Palagada to send her slaves to the church in exchange of his help. The girls are asked to wear gowns and hats because according to her, they

should cover their heads. She taught them how to read the Bible, and how to behave as European women. However, when Mrs. Simpson "who in her heart of hearts regarded these women as having the brains of children"(p.104) attempted to 'civilize' them, they were ridiculous. Emecheta clearly shows that it was difficult for Ma and her friends to become European and this is represented through the way they dress. Indeed, they looked ridiculous when they wore "the straight-shaped English dresses, even with their overfed stomachs; but then they would add the type of heavy headtie that went with the native lappas"(p.103). Through this new fashion of mixing English and African clothes' style, the writer dramatizes the colonizers' will to impose the Western culture which they judged superior. Moreover, Mrs. Simpson does not appear more emancipated than these African women who play an important role in the economic life of Onitsha through their monopoly of trade. The girls are rather taught skills that further anchored them in the domestic sphere like cooking and sewing.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Mrs Meers similarly seems restricted in the domestic sphere for she does not participate in any activity outside her house. Therefore, the idea that European women had more freedom than the African is put into question. Like Mrs. Simpson, she judges Nnaife and Nnu Ego's union illegitimate because it follows the African traditions and she wants to impose her Christian values of marriage upon them. Using her authority as a colonizer of the country, Mrs. Meers threatens to fire Nnaife, if he does not consent to marry Nnu Ego in the church. Nnu Ego who is proud of her African customs, reacts violently when her husband asks her to obey the madam's orders:

You behave like a slave! Do you go to her and say "Please madam crawl-crawl-skin, can I sleep with my wife today?"...Oh shame on you! I will never marry you in church. If she sacks you because of that, I shall go home to my father. I want to live with a man, not a woman-made man ! (p.50).

Moreover, for Nnu Ego who comes from a highly patriarchal society, the attitude of her husband who accepts to be mastered by a woman is enigmatic. His behavior is very similar to that of traditional Ibo women who accept the authority of men on them. This change in values that occurred to her society under the British control makes her wonder how "a situation [could] rob a man of his manhood without knowing it"(p.50) and how her husband could obey "a female whom she would not dream of offering to an enemy god"(p.50). By contrast to her husband's submissiveness, Nnu Ego repeatedly reacts against Mrs. Meers's intrusion in her family's affairs.

This reversal in power relations in which traditional men became controlled by women led to a forced revision of gender. In this colonial context where men have lost their power, Emecheta can question the normative concepts of womanhood and manhood. Indeed, as an Ibo man, Nnaife is not supposed to accept the authority of any woman on him because according to the traditional construction of manhood, submissiveness is a rather female attribute, yet he is controlled by Mrs. Meers. Hence, Nnaife's behaviour contradicts the standards of manhood of his society and this leads us to claim that gender as a socially constructed mould in which men and women have to fit and behave according to its standards, is not eternal and can be broken. Traditional men controlled women because their society had endowed them with such right and not because they were born superior.

In addition to poverty which was an outcome of colonialism, Nnu Ego suffers from Nnaife's devaluation by the colonizers. The strategy of the colonizer is to transform the colonized into his "other" by using his military superiority. According to JanMohamed, the colonizer asserts his complete projection of his "self" on "the other" (the colonized) by exercising his assumed superiority to destroy the "effectiveness of indigenous economic, social, political, legal, and moral systems and imposes his own vision of these structures on the other's recognition of him."⁵ Nnaife embodies the position of the colonizer's ideology of "othering" the natives. Indeed, the Meers have a total authority over him and his submission is represented through his relationship with his masters, especially the Madam. He speaks with his mistress with "his head bowed in submission" and whenever he addresses her, "fear [clings] to his throat" (p.84). Moreover, Nnaife becomes deeply dependent on his masters and their vision of the world. JanMohamed further explains that the construction of the colonized as the other "amounts to the European's narcissistic self recognition since the native, is considered too degraded and inhuman to be credited with any specific subjectivity."⁶

In fact, the superiority of the Europeans is represented through the position of the black man who is at the service of the white master. The colonizer also considers himself as the source of knowledge and civilization while the colonized is associated with stupidity and ignorance. Nnaife internalizes the colonizer's superiority and believes that the only job he can do is to remain a servant for the whites. Emecheta describes him as "one of the Africans who were so used to being told they were stupid in those days that they started to believe in their own imperfections"(p.83).

For the colonized woman, the oppression is double because she has the position of the "other's other". In other words, she is both the "other" of the colonizer who subjugates her as an African and the "other" of African man who controls her as a patriarch. The critic Cynthia Ward observes how "Nnaife, is stripped of his gender, and he must reconstruct his own identity as a man by constructing his wife as 'Other'."⁷ To assert his manhood, Nnaife devalues his wife by banalizing her pregnancy and by often considering her as a mad woman. By minimizing the importance of her motherhood which is Nnu Ego's source of pride and joy, Nnaife can recover some of his dignity and sense of superiority as a leader of the family.

Unlike the "naïve" Nnaife, Nnu Ego could see that the British were not there to help the Africans. She clearly considers the situation in which they were all living in a form of slavery because for her, they were "all slaves to the white man...If they permit [them] to eat, then [they] will eat. If they say [they] will not, then where will [they] get the food?"(p.117). However, this insight into the intentions of the colonizer was partly due to the little contact these women had with the whites.

Moreover, through the character of Nnaife, Emecheta is criticizing the kind of behavior many African men had during the colonial period. When they were ill treated by their masters, these men transferred their anger on their wives. The critic Keith Booker explains the situation in the following way:

Indeed, it is clear that the subservience forced upon Nnaife by the British encourages him to try to dominate Nnu Ego even more brutally than he otherwise might...In short if men are often household tyrants in traditional Igbo society, then colonialism, by challenging their traditional authority, may actually make them even more tyrannical.⁸

Therefore, women suffered indirectly from the colonizer's oppression since they were the only persons on whom some of the so devalued African men could still exercise their authority. When talking about their husbands, Nnu Ego's friend, Cordelia explains: "if their masters treat them badly, they take it out on [us]"(p.51). Because of their physical weakness, women gave them a sense of superiority and this helped them to boost their ego. Several times in the novel Nnu Ego is victim of her husband's violence especially when she starts to blame him for not behaving like a true man according to Ibuza standards of manhood. By making men's life difficult, the colonizer added more hardships to African women's existence; hence, power relations changed under colonialism, and consequently gender relations started to change. For African women, the god-like image which they had always had of their fathers and even husbands was drastically shaken. This alteration in the traditional conception of men as the holders of power might have promoted some change and encouraged women to react against the domination of their husbands. After being beaten by her husband, Nnu Ego finds the courage to resist him in a very violent scene:

Nnu Ego began to scream abuse at him: "You are a lazy, insensitive man! You have no shame. If you hit me again, I shall call the soldiers in the streets. Haven't you any shame?"...Nnaife made to go for her again but held back when Oshia started to howl with fear. He turned to look at the frightened child and in that split second Nnu Ego lifted the head of the broom and gave Nnaife a blow on his shoulder (p.91).

This episode is very important because it shows a possible beginning of change in the main character's self awareness. For the first time, the individual in Nnu Ego comes out and refuses to accept the conventions of the community which allows a man to hit his wife. It is worth considering that Nnu Ego would have never dreamt of

reacting in this way if she had still been living in Ibuza, but in Lagos she dared to hit her husband back. She was not watched by her people and, which gave her the courage to assert herself as a human being. This change in Nnu Ego is the direct consequence of her displacement from the village to the city as well as the presence of a superior power to her husband that is represented by the "soldiers in the street."

Nnu Ego suffers more when the Meers abandon their servants, especially when her husband leaves her to work on a British ship. She is driven out of her room and she has to spend most of her meager income on the rent of a smaller room. Despite all these hardships, Nnu Ego continued to survive with her two sons, but when her husband was sent by the British army to fight in Burma, she almost starved. This was the case of many African women who were left alone with the responsibility of caring for their children while their husbands died for the British.

In *The Slave Girl*, women's refusal of the colonizer's control is reflected through the famous Aba Riots.⁹ Although it did not last for a long time, this revolutionary act stands as an important episode in Nigeria's history of resistance against the British. In the novel, these riots are organized by women who had stalls in the market of Onitsha when the colonial administration wanted to impose taxes on them. Men accepted to pay taxes for their heads, but women rebelled against this decision that aimed at exploiting them.

In fact, the Aba riots can be considered as a movement of resistance through which Nigerian women tried to show their resentment against the oppression and corruption of local agents. It is true that this women's demonstration did not affect the colonizer seriously, yet it testified of a feminist solidarity and was a good example for men to

follow in order to end the British colonization in Nigeria. Therefore, we may think that through this background of political unrest, Emecheta tries to link colonial resistance with women's personal freedom. If these women manifested courage in resisting the colonizers who used weapons against them, it was very difficult for them to react against the patriarchal authority of their husbands and fathers and this demonstrates how powerful were centuries of traditions. So strong was the process of socialization that women rarely questioned their status and considered it as part of their fate against which no action could be taken.

However, it should be mentioned that while some aspects of the traditional Nigerian society were not favourable for the emancipation of women, the colonization of their country made the situation even more difficult to bear. In fact, as colonized subjects, they were enslaved by the British control, but more importantly they suffered from poverty and starvation. The economic change generated by colonialism had profoundly deteriorated women's status because it robbed them of their economic autonomy which was granted by the indigenous culture. Hence, the study of the economic situation of women living in urban centers allows us to further understand the impact of colonialism on traditional women.

When Ojebeta and Nnu Ego were taken respectively to the towns of Onitsha and Lagos, their first reaction was very similar. They were impressed by the big size of the city and the large number of its population. Both Nnu Ego and Ojebeta felt as strangers in this new environment and they faced the difficulty of adapting themselves to realities and values of the city.

Ojebeta comes to Onitsha at the age of seven, so her identity is not fully moulded by Ibuza standards and this gives her more flexibility to accept change. When she reaches the town, Ojebeta eats "Agibi Akala" which is found only in this big cosmopolitan place. This food can be considered as a symbol of her integration in the urban modern context. Nnu Ego, on the other hand, arrives in Lagos as a mature woman who has been socialized according to the norms of her traditional society. Thus, it is more difficult for her to combine the values of the two worlds and this crucial disparity between the two characters allows them to develop differently. Ojebeta does not suffer from poverty in Ma Palagada's house. Ma's slaves are well fed and dressed in comparison with other Nigerian people who can hardly feed their families. Ma does not hesitate to feed her slaves well because all her trade depends on their labour. In fact, the impact of colonialism on the economic status of women is more highlighted in *The Joys of Motherhood* because unlike Ojebeta, Nnu Ego's life was more affected by the implementation of new economic systems in Nigeria. For that reason, we will focus more on Nnu Ego's experience in Lagos.

The first aspect of the city that the writer wants to accentuate in both novels is probably the growing of Nigeria into a more individualistic society, and the new mercantilist system introduced by the British played an important role in this change. Emecheta uses symbolism in order to show this new economic orientation of the Nigerian society especially in *The Slave Girl*. Before reaching Onitsha, Ojebeta and Okolie went to the stream of Atakpo. It is described as a pure and mystic place where the world of the living and the dead meet. This virgin land is to be contrasted with Onitsha which is presented exclusively through its market which, according to the

critic Modupe Olaogun, highlights the mercantilist expansion arising from increased urbanization and international trade experienced by Nigeria in the early twentieth century.¹⁰

Capitalism was making its way to Nigeria. This economic system is essentially individualistic since it encourages personal enrichment instead of the traditional self-subsistence agricultural systems that characterized rural places. By using the market as an icon in *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta aims at showing the great economic change that was occurring under the British colonization. The introduction of a new currency transformed the economy from the exchange of goods for domestic consumption into a market economy. This new economic system was developing very rapidly and a new class of wealthy traders started to emerge. According to Robert Blood Jr, this change in the economic life had drastic effects on the social organization because it weakened kinship ties. He holds:

The modern industrial system was not entirely compatible with strong kinship systems. For example, labour mobility required by modern industry is not compatible with stable kin clusters unwilling to release their members or to move on mass sites of labour demand.¹¹

Within this economic change it was difficult for the community to have a strong hold on its members as this context would have allowed for the individual to be independent of the group. Nnu Ego's co-wife, Adaku is a woman who understands this economic change and frees herself from the community's loyalties. However, Emecheta shows that this process of individuation was often traumatic because under British rule, the economic conditions were extremely hard, and living among the group might help people to survive. Moreover, for traditional women who were used

to depending on their husbands and the extended family, breaking the ties of the community was a difficult process.

Ojebeta's two brothers were among the Igbo people who found farming no more rewarding and preferred to earn their living differently. If the elder brother Enhua went to Lagos, Okolie opted for selling his sister for some coins and later joining his brother to work for the British. This mass rural exodus to urban centers was a phenomenon that generated many problems because life in the city under the colonial rule was far from being rewarding or comfortable as Ibo people believed. New jobs which were often referred to as "white man's jobs" attracted many farmers who wanted to have a European life-style. Nnu Ego's father explains that it was a time when "every young man wants to cement his mud and cover it with corrugated-iron sheets instead of palm leaves"(p.37). Nnu Ego left for the city of Lagos and she was extremely surprised to see the change in the way people earned their living.

Nnu Ego's first clash with modernity occurs when she discovers that her husband works as a washer man for Mrs.Meers. This job is completely beyond her comprehension and she continually compares Nnaife to the strong and proud Ibo men who smell of tobacco and burnt wood. For her, domestic work is a woman's duty while men are supposed to work in the fields or hunt wild animals. She describes her husband as a "middle-aged woman"(p42) and Lagos as a place "where men's flesh hung loose on their bones, where men had bellies like pregnant women"(p.46). This image in which men are likened to pregnant women reinforces the idea that even aesthetics were standardized according to the requirements of gender expectations. In fact, a man is not supposed to be fat and only women could

have bellies; otherwise, they were feminized. Men and women should behave and appear according to a given set of norms and in case of adapting some physical aspects of the opposite sex like having pot bellies, the social conventions would condemn this individual. Hence, Nnu Ego who came to prove her womanhood by being a mother finds her husband looking and behaving like a woman and this made her question her perception of gender identity.

To emphasize the colonial control of men in *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta emasculates Pa Palagada who is financially dependent on his wife. Symbolically, Pa Palagada is named after his wife. This suggests that although Pa monopolizes power and controls his slaves, he is effeminized by the writer to suggest the reversal in power relation since the slave owner becomes owned by the colonizers.

As the head of the family, Nnaife is supposed to be the provider for his wife and children; however, his income as a washer man is very low. For the first time in her life, Nnu Ego experiences poverty; however, being used to work as all Ibuza women, she starts to do the only job allowed her in Lagos which is trade. Nnu Ego helps her husband by selling cigarettes and matches to survive, but soon her baby dies. In fact, lacking any relatives in Lagos, Nnu Ego could not leave her son with the elder women of her family as she could have done in Ibuza. Nnu Ego could not combine trade with childbearing and domestic work. This severe division of labour in which men, as the only providers of the family have outdoor jobs while women should content themselves with the domestic sphere is one of the negative consequences of the colonial rule in Nigeria and many other African countries.

According to the critic and sociologist Ifi Amadium, the British colonizers "undermined women's traditional autonomy because they introduced their Victorian ideology."¹² This ideology stipulates that men and women were supposed to respect the dichotomy of public/private spheres. The Meers represent a typical British Victorian family with Mr. Meers working outside as a doctor while his wife remains at home. This is the first traumatic reality of the city that Nnu Ego has to face when she arrives there. She is compelled to help her husband because they cannot live on his meager income, but when she tries to work, her baby dies because nobody helps her at home. In other words, Nnu Ego loses her child when she tries to combine the public and private spheres in the cruel urban environment of Lagos.

Emecheta is tackling here an important feminist issue which is the exclusion of women from the public life because of their domestic responsibilities. Emecheta is criticizing this negative change in the status of traditional women, for if the new economic changes brought by the new mode of production favoured personal growth and enrichment, women were deprived of the advantage of sharing the public sphere with men. Under colonialism, women were gradually robbed of their financial autonomy which they experienced in their traditional societies as they became more and more financially dependent on men. Nnu Ego concludes:

But were they not in a white man's world where it was the duty of the father to provide for his family? In Iboza, women made a contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role (p.81).

In addition to the exclusion of women from the public life, their freedom of movement was reduced since they were confined to the home. It is important to note the contrast that Emecheta makes between the large size of the city where everyone

is almost anonymous and the very small room in which Nnu Ego lives confined with her family. It is equally the case of Ojebeta who shares a narrow room with the other slave girls. Ibuza women, on the other hand, enjoyed a freedom of movement; they could work in the farm, go to the stream to fetch water and wash clothes, they could sell farm products in the markets and more importantly stay outdoors without being necessarily accompanied by men.

In the city, a woman could not work in white man's jobs like men who earned money, but this dependence on men did not reduce their responsibilities as such. A woman was supposed to provide "the food from her husband's meager house keeping money, but finding the money for clothes, for any kind of comfort, in some cases for the children school fees, was on her shoulders"(p.52-53). In order to meet all these needs women turned to trade. When Nnaife loses his job after the Meers family leave the country, Nnu Ego takes the risk of starting trade again because it was the only way for them to survive.

Poverty becomes more apparent with the approach of the Second World War and while the whites were exploiting the country, African people were like "beggars". Despite this precarious status, many people refused to leave this difficult life and preferred to suffer there rather than go back to their homelands and labour their lands. Nnu Ego's situation is further complicated by the death of Nnaife's brother for although Nnaife earns some money from his work, Nnu Ego and now her two boys have not enjoyed it for a long time when a new wife comes to share their life.

According to the customs of Ibuza when a man dies, his brother inherits his wealth, children as well as his wives. Although Nnu Ego lives in a modern city, she

cannot escape polygamy which was imposed on women by traditions and customs. She has to share her small room and meager income with her new co-wife, Adaku and her children.

Nnu Ego considers Adaku as a "new menace"(p.118) who comes to share her husband, her room, and her food. In Ibuza, Adaku would not have been a burden since she could have her own separate hut and Nnaife could use his share in his brother's land to feed her and her children, but in Lagos they have to sleep in the same room and depend on Nnaife who soon finds a job as a grass-cutter at the railway. Indeed, even polygamy becomes in a town like Lagos more difficult to bear; however, Nnu Ego has to accept the presence of her co-wife and play the role of the good senior wife otherwise people would laugh at her. She thinks of her father who would tell her: "Please don't disgrace the name of the family again"(p.119). Refusing polygamy would mean bringing disgrace to her father and this shows that even in a city like Lagos where nobody is going to judge her when she deviates from Ibuza norms, Nnu Ego continues to carry to shackles of tradition. Her detachment from the control of the community is only physical, for despite the distance, she remains psychologically imprisoned by traditions. Agbadi's voice is used by Emecheta as a symbol for Nnu Ego's entrapment, and whenever she tries to react against the unjust conditions of life, his voice reminds her of her communal loyalties as a wife, a mother and a daughter. Her small room may be equally considered as another symbol of her imprisonment.

In Ibuza, the title of senior wife brings honor and respect to women. But in Lagos, even this little honor has disappeared leaving room to hard responsibility without any

reward or even gratitude. Nnu Ego expresses her despair about her new status as follows:

Whenever it comes to sacrifice then everyone reminds me about being the senior wife, but if there is something to gain, I am told to quiet because wanting a good thing does not benefit my situation. I can understand the value of being a senior wife in Ibuza; not here, Nnaife. It doesn't mean anything (p.134).

Nnu Ego's obstinacy to respect the tradition of polygamy in a place like Lagos was absurd, but she continued to believe in the honor she could have as both a senior wife and mother of sons. When "their" husband was compelled to join the army, it was Nnu Ego's responsibility to feed the two families which became even larger with the birth of Nnu Ego's twin girls and Adaku's son. She "was supposed to be strong, being the senior wife, to behave more like a man than a woman"(p.140). Consequently, the title of senior wife is another way of enslaving Nnu Ego who clings to her traditions at the expense of her well being and happiness. However, Emecheta demonstrates that Nnu Ego is not a passive character who is not aware of her entrapment as some critics describe her. Eustace Palmer, for instance, criticizes her weakness and submissiveness and explains that the passivity of Nnu Ego makes *The Joys of Motherhood* ineffective as a feminist novel.¹³ It is also true that Nnu Ego goes through many moments of self-realization in the novel:

On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for children, imprisoned by her role of the senior wife. It was not fair, she felt the way men cleverly used woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her (p.137).

This statement and many others in the novel can be considered as feminist denunciations of traditional women's entrapment in their roles of mothers and wives. Because of their sense of responsibility, women often accept to sacrifice their well

being for the sake of their children and husbands. Despite this admirable feminist awareness about the status of women in her society, Nnu Ego refuses to free herself from the chains of patriarchy. This "no longer at ease" state in which Nnu Ego is living makes of her an alienated woman in the fast city of Lagos. In fact, Nnu Ego could neither reject her role as co-wife which was inflicting great sufferings on her, nor could she adopt some Western values which could have helped her, notably, the prohibition of polygamy by Christianity.

Life in urban centers was characterized by many hardships that accompanied colonialism. African women had to bear the hard living conditions and the dissatisfaction of their husbands who worked as servants for the British families. In addition to the constraints that existed in the traditional patriarchal societies, these women saw their freedom further restricted by the Victorian principles brought by the British. Jobs were reserved to men in the cities and even trade was difficult to practice because of poverty.

Notes

- 1- John E Flint. "Nigeria: The Colonial Experience from 1880 to 1914".In L.H.Gann and Peter Duignan. **Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1976, p.220.
- 2- Barbara Christian. op.cit., p.148.
- 3- Juliana Nfah Abbenyi. op. cit.,pp.41-42.
- 4- Patrick Colm Hogan. **Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literature of India, Africa, and the Caribbean**. New York: SUNY, 2000,p.180.
- 5- Abdul R. JanMohamed. "*The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature*".In H.L.Gates, Jr (ed.) "**Race" Writing and Difference**. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986,p. 78.
- 6- Ibid.
- 7- Cynthia Ward. "*What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of "Otherhood"*".Sat Mar 8 10:25:40 2008, p. 94. (<http://www.jstor.org>)

- 8- M. Keith Booker. **The African Novel in English: An Introduction**. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998, p.88.
- 9- In describing these riots, Elechi Amadi explains that " this incident, popularly referred to as the Aba Women's War, was initiated by Igbo women who interpreted a headcount of women as a first step towards forcing them to pay tax...The demonstration which began in Aba and Owerri spread rapidly over much of the Eastern provinces, including Calabar and Opobo. The colonial administration was shocked at the efficiency with which otherwise docile women mobilized and organized themselves without any help from their men". See. Elechi Amadi. **Ethics in Nigerian Culture**. Ibadan: Heinemann ,1982. pp.73-74.
- 10- Modupe Olaogun, ".*Slavery and Etiological Discourse in the Writing of Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta*".In **Research in African Literatures**. Indiana: Indiana University Press.Vol.33.No.2, 2002,p.185.
- 11- Robert.O. Blood. Jr. "*Social Change and Kinship Patterns*".In Reuben Hill and René König (eds).**Families in East and West: Socialization Process and Kinship Ties**. Paris: Mouton and Co, 1970, p. 198.
- 12- Ifi Amadiume. **Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society**. London: Zed Press, 1987, p. 136.
- 13- See Eustace Palmer. "*The Feminine Point of View: Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood*".In **African Literature Today**.No.13. London: Heinemann, 1983, p.42.

Chapter 2:

Women within a New Social Fabric

Alongside the economic change, the social fabric of the Nigerian society under the British control was subject to many transformations notably the gradual replacement of the multifaceted communal matrix of the village by the nuclear family. Indeed, the difficult economic conditions in these urban centers during the colonial period did not allow men to have several wives. Moreover, the new Christian values which started to spread in Nigeria prohibited this practice. In other words, the rate of polygamous marriages decreased in the city in comparison with the rural areas. Besides, Christianity, education made its way to the Nigerian society and this led to the spread of Western values that equally rejected polygamy. However, this was not the case of Nnu Ego whose husband inherited Adaku and did not care for the financial situation of the family.

The traditional conception of the family changed and the writer shows how this alteration in the social organization was accompanied with the disintegration of the communal spirit because people were more concerned with making money. Emecheta seems nostalgic of her African roots when she compares Nnu Ego's family with the rural families of Ibuza:

Like other husbands and wives in Lagos, Nnu Ego and Nnaife started growing slightly apart...There was no time for petting or talking to each other about love. That type of family awareness which the illiterate farmer was able to show his wives, his household, his compound, had been lost in Lagos, for the job of the white man, for the joy of buying expensive lappas, and for the feel of shining trinkets (p.52).

This passage confirms that the Nigerian society was getting more individualistic as a result of a new economic model based on capitalism which was introduced by the British. This move meant the sacrifice of some positive aspects of traditional society like solidarity and help among the members of the same group. We can conclude that

Emecheta's call for the individual's self assertion is not to be mistaken with the complete sacrifice of old social systems. Nnu Ego who is used to a large family is often nostalgic of life in Ibuza and she repeatedly relates the death of her first son to the absence of family assistance. When she was depressed after the death of her son she became depressed, but if she had still been in Ibuza, the old women of the family would have helped her to overcome her grief. Ojebeta equally suffers from the absence of her relatives and their protection. Her alienation is engendered by the cut from her roots in Ibuza because she is brought to Onitsha at an early age. The small room in which all the girls gather at the end of the day offers her a sense of security which helps her to overcome her solitude. The critic Omar Sougou insists on the importance of this symbol for Ojebeta who finds in this room a substitute for the love of her dead mother:

Ojebeta does not substitute the distant relative and slave owner Ma Palagada for her lost mother, but the slave common-room instead. Security lies there, and in her charms. The intimacy of the room, the closeness of her mates--this is the space in which the repressed discourse of the muted finds its outlet.....It is a place where female bonding is effective in the slaves' attention to one another....Life outside the common-room spells out absence of sisterhood, mutual assistance and sympathy, and an encounter with class prejudice and violence at the hands of Ma's daughter.¹

As all the other slaves, Ojebeta is victim of physical violence, sexual molestation and forced labour. In fact, both Nnu Ego and Ojebeta experience solitude when they come to the city, which has enhanced their sense of alienation in the urban society which is made of more than one ethnic group. However, it should be noted that Ojebeta has better integrated this cosmopolitan place because of her young age in comparison with Nnu Ego. When she arrives to Onitsha, Ojebeta comes into contact

with the slave girls who come from different tribes whereas Nnu Ego finds many difficulties to make friends and she ends her life in Lagos almost alone.

Emecheta equally demonstrates that this new social organization with weaker communal ties had some advantages since it allowed the individual to emerge as an independent person with his/her own world view and the urban space played an important role in this process of individuation. Indeed, the city is represented in the novels as a large space in which people become anonymous. Unlike the rural society where almost everybody knows everybody, the city gathers people from various parts of the country with different traditions and customs. Ojebeta was afraid of losing her tattoos and tribal marks because without them she would become similar to all Onitsha girls. In this anonymous context of the town, the individual could break some conventions and customs without being condemned.

Moreover, the geographical distance between individuals living in the city and their large families remaining in the village led to their gradual social and psychological detachment from the group. The city became a possible place of emancipation for women who, far from their traditional kinship obligations could aspire to assert themselves especially through financial autonomy and education. However, Emecheta shows that this process of individuation was difficult for traditional women who had been socialized for long years to accept subordination. It was even a traumatic process for Nnu Ego who went through a series of violent experiences especially the loss of her first child, and the ingratitude of her eldest son, Oshia on whom she puts all her hopes to secure her old age. Although Nnu Ego reaches several moments of self-realization that demonstrate a clear awareness of her

situation, the individual in her is always silenced by her loyalties to her traditions. Despite the distance, Nnu Ego does not seize the opportunity to free the individual in her and remains under the hold of her community obligations.

By being far from the large family, the individual could aspire to free himself/herself from some constraints that the community may impose through traditions. Nnu Ego is victim of her sense of responsibility towards her people because she considers giving birth to sons as a duty to ensure the immortality of her community, but she does not see life in the city as a way to improve her status. Adaku, on the other hand, seizes the opportunity of this change in values to free herself from some of the shackles of patriarchy and seek a better life.

Just like Ona, Adaku may be considered as the antithesis of Nnu Ego. Although she comes from the same milieu as Nnu Ego, Adaku does not idealize the values of her traditional society. She shows a great ability to adapt herself to the realities of the fast changing Lagos. In addition to Ona, Adaku can be seen as the second feminist character who has a non-conformist behaviour. When Nnaife inherits his brother's wives, only Adaku accepts to come to the city because like most Ibuza people, she believes that Lagos is a place where she can have a better life. Nnu Ego is shocked by Adaku's display of pleasure on her first night with Nnaife and considers her as "one of those shameless modern women whom Nnu Ego did not like"(p.124). Adaku's first night with Nnaife with Nnu Ego sleeping in the same room is one of the most humiliating moments of her life. The critic Laurretta Ngcobo notes that Emecheta's treatment of polygamy is an exposure of African women's "silent suffering" insisting on "female complacency and acceptance of male domination."²

Indeed, Nnu Ego could not even speak out her anger because the society would blame her and Emecheta articulates in this powerful scene the sufferings which polygamy might inflict on women who were silenced by traditions and social conventions.

The practice of polygamy was affected by the changes that occurred in colonized Nigeria. The introduction of Christianity by the European missionaries around 1841³ led to the spread of new values that called for the abolition of polygamy. In *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonists' contact with Christianity occurred when they moved to the towns. The young Ojebeta accompanies her mistress, Ma Palagada and the other slaves to the church meetings and she gradually adheres to the new religion. Nnu Ego, on the other hand, has little contact with the church and prefers to respect the beliefs of her ancestors. The writer shows that the Igbo people adopted an ambivalent attitude towards this new religion. In fact, while many Igbos were converted to Christianity, they continued to maintain relationships with the ancestors, gods and other unseen powers through a complex system of sacrifices and rituals. The Igbos did not accept all the values that were in contradiction with their traditional religion; therefore, we may expect that any positive change concerning women brought by Christianity would not be easily integrated into their society.

Some of the new values preached by the church affected to a certain extent the traditional status of African women. The Christian perception of the family was somehow in contradiction with the African communal organization. Indeed, the nuclear family was meant to replace the large extended families based mainly on

polygamy because the Christian values rejected this kind of marriage. This Christian condemnation of polygamy may be considered as a very positive change for traditional women, but here again the writer explains how some African men did not content themselves with one wife. They rather adopted a very pragmatic view about religion since they rejected all the values that did not correspond to their interest, and monogamy was one of them.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta describes the hypocritical behaviour of some Christian converts through the character of Nnaife who attends the church just to please his white masters. In fact, Nnaife had only been a good Christian so long as his livelihood with the Meers depended on it. However, when his masters left the country, he did not care about respecting the church by accepting Adaku as a second wife. Nnu Ego rejects this hypocritical behaviour that some people in Lagos had. She "hated this thing called the European way; these people called Christian taught that a man must marry only one wife. Now here was Nnaife with not just two, but planning to have maybe three or four in the not so distant future"(p.119). Therefore, Nnaife does not respect what the church preaches and adheres to Christian teachings only when it pleases him. By contrast, Nnu Ego repudiates this marriage, and she even refuses to attend the church which she finds boring.

In *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta equally treats the hypocritical behaviour of some people who like Nnaife create a new form of Christianity which fits their world view. The Palagadas are known for being fervent Christians who do not miss any church meeting and Ma is described as a useful sister of the community because she contributes in providing the church with financial support. But in spite of her

complete adherence to the Christian values, Ma does not hesitate to have slaves because all her trade depends on slaves' labour. Pa Palagada also does not restrict himself to the values of the church for although he does not take a second wife, he has sexual relations with his slave girl Chiago, who after the death of Ma becomes his wife. He tries just to keep appearances and behave like a good Christian by taking walks with his wife "as the church encourages husbands to do"(p.136), but he was not really in love with her. The writer demonstrates that going to the church becomes just a way to show off and describes it as a moment when "everybody took the opportunity to display their latest lappa and show the world that they belonged to the church"(p.119). Frantz Fanon thus describes the colonizer's motives in implementing the church:

The church in the colonies is the white people's church, the foreigners' church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor. And, as we know, in this matter many are called but few chosen.⁴

In fact, some African people accepted the Christian church as part of the process of change that occurred with the colonization of their country. The church as another aspect of modernity was integrated into their life without necessarily adhering to its values.

Christian marriage was becoming more common and for Ojebeta who had been in touch with the church for a long time, having a Christian husband who would offer her a European-like wedding ceremony with a long white dress was necessary. Ojebeta objects to traditional marriage because she rejects polygamy and believes that any marriage outside the church is "the work of the devil. The Bible and the Catechism books say so"(p.157). In fact, this was the belief of many Nigerian

couples, especially the educated generation who gradually accepted monogamy. However, for most African traditional societies in which polygamy was so ingrained, this new kind of marriage was beyond their understanding.

In Emecheta's novels, we can note that missionary work in Nigeria did not change the status of African women to a great extent. Indeed, if polygamy was rejected by Christian teachings, we should not forget that this religion is based on patriarchal values which conceive of men as holders of power. It is true that some negative customs were eradicated by the Christian church notably the human sacrifices, but as far as women were concerned, the new religion did not improve their life. The husband-wife relationship remained unchanged except for some monogamous marriages, but here again if men could not marry a second wife, they continued to have mistresses.

Some women living in the city refuse to accept polygamy and become single mothers. Adaku adopts a rather realistic world view which seems to correspond to the realities of Lagos. After the loss of her son, Adaku becomes highly depressed, but instead of falling in madness like Nnu Ego does when she loses her first child, she puts all her hopes in her daughters. When Nnaife is at war, she even starts to develop her trade to build a lucrative business and plans to leave her husband. The critic Nfah Abbenyi describes the contrast between Adaku and her co-wife as follows:

By refusing to "kill" herself physically, psychologically, and economically, Adaku rejects the equation of childlessness or having female children with madness for women. Most of all, she rejects the lack of sons that only perpetuates the phallus and the Law of the Father.⁵

Unlike Nnu Ego, Adaku's life in Lagos allows her to recognize the disparities between motherhood as a concept and as an experience. In fact, Adaku comes to this city with the belief that a woman's success is determined by her ability to bear male children. However, when she looks at her co-wife's poor status in spite of being a mother of sons, and after the harsh treatment she receives when she loses her son, Adaku realizes the absurdity of the over idealization of mothering. Emecheta endows Adaku with enough feminist awareness to question old concepts and reformulate them so that they serve her interests. If Adaku cannot be the mother of a son, she tries to make of her daughters a source of pride by educating them.

Despite all her efforts, Adaku continues to bear the mistreatment of Nnu Ego who uses her position as a senior wife and the mother of the family heirs to hurt Adaku and remind her that she has only daughters and by definition, no rights. Following Hegel's master/slave dialectic we can consider Adaku and Nnu Ego's relation as a case of two consciousnesses battling for power; a life and death conflict in which Nnu Ego tries to impose herself as a master and make of her co-wife an object or slave. The disrespect that Nnu Ego shows to one of Adaku's relatives comes as the last blow that makes her leave this unrewarding life and when Adaku complains about this event, she is blamed for "committing an unforgivable sin"(p.166). Her sin is to complain against Nnu Ego who is the mother of sons. This unfair treatment makes Adaku reach one of the most significant moments of self-realization in the novel and decides to change her status. She at last realizes: "we women set impossible standards for ourselves.

That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own"(p.169).

By leaving her husband's room, Adaku breaks the chains of the community and she begins to exist as an individual. Moreover, the character of Adaku, allows Emecheta to prove that patriarchy and chauvinistic attitudes are not the only source of women's oppression. Indeed, not only men, but sometimes women also may have a share of responsibility when they set impossible standards for one another. Patriarchal codes can also be internalized by women and it is the case of Nnu Ego who allies with her society and condemns her co-wife as a failed woman. Nnu Ego who was severely judged by society for her sterility is in her turn judging her co-wife for the same "sin". Instead of understanding Adaku's despair after the death of her son, Nnu Ego who has herself experienced the same pain, made Adaku's life even more unbearable by constantly reducing her, using the same weapons that society has already employed against her. Adaku is, in fact, the embodiment of Emecheta's view point about feminism. Emecheta is a feminist with "a small f"⁶ as she often refers to herself in her writings. Her feminist outlook is represented by this rebellious and unconventional woman who understands the realities of the location in which she lives. She is not rigidified by the norms of her traditional society and learns from her experience the necessity of change. She understands that financial autonomy allows a woman to emancipate herself and tries to achieve this goal.

However, despite her freedom, Adaku does not detach herself completely from her society; she continues to attend the Igbo meetings of women and support Nnu Ego and her family. Moreover, although she rejects wifhood as the only way to be

"a dignified single woman," she does not refuse motherhood. This confirms Emecheta's conception of feminism which does not discredit "motherhood" when it is not constructed as a "raison-d'être" for women. Adaku functions as a mirror for Nnu Ego which reflects all her weaknesses. This technique of using the paired characters to highlight the shortcomings of the hero is equally present in Mariama Bâ's novel, *So Long a Letter*. Like Nnu Ego, Ramatoulaye continues to have faith in her traditions and accepts her polygamous marriage for the sake of her children. Aissatou, on the other hand, adopts a non-conformist behaviour that resembles Adaku's when she similarly refuses the extended family intrusion in her marriage. Bâ draws Aissatou as a free woman who strongly repudiates her subjugation as a wife, but she does not reject her role as a mother. When she leaves her husband to work in America, she takes her children with her and this act shows that both Emecheta and Bâ use what Alice Walker calls "a balanced representation of the black woman"⁷ whose emancipation does not contradict her social role as mother.

The only flaw that some critics may find in the conception of Adaku as a feminist character is that she uses prostitution to ensure her financial success. Therefore, Adaku would again depend on men to reach her self-realization as a rich trader.⁸ However, one can assume that by making Adaku a prostitute, Emecheta wants to highlight the difficult living conditions of the colonized Lagos and the still chauvinistic attitudes of Nigerian society at that time left little room for Adaku to exist as a single woman. Even her society which first condemns her when she becomes a prostitute, gradually accepts her and she continues to attend their

meetings. She is even forgiven by her people who "put the blame on Lagos itself; they said it was a fast town which could corrupt the most innocent girls"(p.170).

According to the feminist critic Patricia Mclean, Adaku embodies Emecheta's view about the necessity for the colonized people to discard all the harmful customs and traditions and adhere only to the positive ones. She further insists on the capacity of this witty female character to take the positive things from colonialism when she decides to spend all her money to give her daughters a European education because she becomes aware of the importance of education for the future of her country.⁹ This leads us to discuss another important factor of change for Emecheta's female characters' development, that is education.

Having been herself victim of the sexist decision of her parents who did not allow her to attend school as her brother, Emecheta has always dramatized Nigerian women's experience with education in her writings.¹⁰ Our concern is to see whether education functioned as a gateway that had allowed the feminine self to assert herself in the Nigerian male-dominated society or as an institution which further limited women's potential. In fact, under colonialism, Christian education and knowledge of the English language became new assets of success in Nigeria. The traditional standards of leadership moved from the elders and chiefs of tribes to the hands of the educated men or the "élite".¹¹ Therefore, education became a source of power and the exclusion of women from learning meant the consecration of their second-class citizenship.

In *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta was allowed by her masters to acquire some learning in Mrs Simpson's school. Slaves were sent to schools because when missionary

education started to spread, African people refused to educate their children by the whites. However, when new professions that required education appeared with the colonial rule, people's view about schooling changed. It became even a priority for any family to ensure the education of their sons to get jobs with the whites. Ojebeta learned how to read the Bible, but her learning did not go beyond this stage since it was not necessary for her as a girl to have a full education. She was rather asked to learn some skills that would prepare her for marriage.

Emecheta describes all the skills that Ojebeta learns in Mrs Simpson's "academy". Girls there learn to behave like European women; they are "taught how to bake cakes from maize flour, how to lift their long dresses decorously when they walked to church; they were taught how to crochet and how to embroider chain-stitches in patterns"(p.133). In fact, some critics blame colonialism for denying women access to formal learning. Most African women were excluded from public life after the independence of their countries because they lacked education. The critic Ure Mezu denounces the colonial institutions for adopting the same sexist attitudes as traditional societies. She observes:

Colonial rule aggravated the situation by introducing a lopsided system to which African men received a well-rounded education while, like their European counterparts before the mid-nineteenth century African women received only utilitarian skills in Domestic Scientific Centers.¹²

Therefore, the colonial institutions did not improve African women's lives since they did not have equal learning opportunities with men. The critic Carole Boyce Davies equally shows that the blame should not be exclusively put on the back of African traditions for such exclusion from schools and concludes that "the colonial

administrations were therefore willing accomplices because they imported a world view in which women were of secondary importance."¹³

The utilitarian education that Ojebeta receives does not lead to her emancipation. In fact, after the death of her mistress, Ojebeta decides to return to Ibuza and live with her own people. Although she is well fed and dressed in Ma's house, for Ojebeta nothing is more important than her freedom. Consequently, she flees from Onitsha to live among her people where "nobody would dare call her slave because she was not"(p.160).

Ojebeta's return to Ibuza is a third journey which like the first two ones engenders an important change in her development. As an Ogbanje spirit which is destined to die and be reborn again if the cycle is not broken by sacrifices, Ojebeta cannot escape her fate of continually travelling from one space to the other. She moves from the city in which she has experienced exploitation and dehumanization to her home village that is for her synonymous of freedom and dignity which very soon turns to be illusions. Her coming back to Ibuza signifies for her a possible rebirth as a free human being, but since she is an Ogbanje, this birth is very short lived. In fact, soon after her return, Ojebeta's aunt tries to take her freedom from her by forcing her to marry a relative but she refuses. Emecheta makes a link between this myth of the Ogbanje with its cultural connotation for the Igbos and the narrative of her novel. The critic Omar Sougou delineates the presence of a sub-text in the novel which blends with Ojebeta's story:

The continuity of this sub-text, represented by the concept of Ogbanje and its meaning in the World of Ibuza, with the supra-text developing around the subjugation of Ojebeta since her birth will be exploited to good effect by Emecheta.

She uses it to inscribe the narrative in a gender-oriented rhetoric that exposes the dark side of a world that shackles women...¹⁴

Emecheta organizes the narrative into cycles and if Ojebeta tries to liberate herself from one form of slavery, she immediately falls into another one because no change happens in her status which could break this cycle. When Ojebeta moves to Ibuza, she is no more considered as a slave in name, but she remains one in status. She was in reality just changing owners. After long years of slavery, the free Ojebeta is again reduced to a commodity by her aunt's husband who claims her bride price since he is the only remaining man in her family. The narrator describes her status as follows:

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 (p.160).

Ojebeta's situation does not change after she returns to Ibuza and her education does not make her react against the still existing shackles of a tradition that deprives women of their freedom. She rather becomes an example of cultural alienation for whom civilization means to be a sophisticated woman who wears velvet loose dresses and perfume. Her contact with the colonial culture gives her the illusion of elite status in Ibuza and the symbol of her cultural alienation is the new English name, Alice which she adds to her African name. To show how modern they were, many Ibuza girls started to imitate her behaviour by adopting new "exotic" names. People were even ashamed of their Igbo names which were the symbols of their African identity. The reader may find some inconsistencies in Ojebeta's behaviour; first she desperately tries to preserve her charms and tattoos which are symbols of her identity, and after growing up, she shows contempt for this same identity. Like

Abdoulaye Sadjı's *Nini*, Ojebeta gives the profile of the alienated colonized who tries to be assimilated in the colonizer's culture.

This fascination for the white man's culture is what Frantz Fanon describes in his book *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* as the colonized complex of dependence. He explains that by being so devalued by the whites, the colonized people believe in the inferiority of their race. In order to prove their "humanity", the black people try to become white; if they cannot be white in their skin, they try to be white in manners and life-style.¹⁵

We are surprised to learn that Ojebeta's union with Jacob cannot be made without the approbation of her brothers who were living in Lagos. Although Okolie sold her to slavery, she is still owned by this brother whom she has not seen for years. Instead of blaming him for all the sufferings she has experienced, Ojebeta simply forgives him and even comes to thank him for selling her to the Palagadas. Ojebeta concludes that it is "because Okolie had taken her to Otu to be trained, Jacob now wanted her to be his wife for that she was thankful"(p.170). The narrator describes Jacob as "a very conventional person and who would do nothing that went against customs, traditions or local mores"(p.173). In fact, he refuses to marry Ojebeta before the payment of her dowry to the brothers who had abandoned her when she was still a young girl.

With the hope that her union with Jacob would free her from the control of her aunt and her husband, Ojebeta starts another cycle of birth and death through her journey to Lagos where the couple decides to marry. According to Ojebeta, her marriage with an educated man signals her rebirth as a free woman, but the narrative unfolds with her disillusionment. Indeed, Ojebeta's status as a wife is not very different from that

of other illiterate and non Christian traditional wives. Emecheta summarizes her relationship with Jacob as follows:

There was certainly a kind of eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced may be by centuries of traditions, taboos, and latterly, Christian dogma. Slave, obey your master. Wife, honor your husband, who is your father, your head, your heart, your soul. *So there was little room for Ojebeta to exercise her own individuality.* (p.178). [emphasis added].

We may conclude that this is not a relation of equals and the metaphor of slavery which is Emecheta's leitmotif to describe the traditional marriage is similarly used with this new Christian marriage to show that if the form changes, women's status remains the same. Ojebeta is even beaten by her "educated husband" and she accepts it "because that was what she had been brought up to believe a wife should expect" (p.178). Jacob's behaviour is further puzzling when he paid Ma's son Clifford money to completely free Ojebeta from slavery. This educated man who was supposed to be perfectly aware of the British laws that imprisoned those who traded in human beings, did not denounce Clifford as a slave owner and even accepted to give him the money to free his wife. Jacob pays Clifford because he believes in the Igbo curse which says that slaves "are never really free until [they] have repaid what was paid for [them]"(p.145). Hence, education did not really change his convictions about some negative old beliefs and superstitions.

In fact, Jacob is not so "modern" as Ojebeta thinks when she first meets him, and that is why Emecheta considers her marriage with him just as another form of slavery. He is just a new master for Ojebeta who accepts to be enslaved again under the form of marriage with a member of her own people. Consequently, we can assume that between socialization on one hand, and the colonial sexist institutions on the other, the traditional construction of wifehood did not change considerably.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, education equally appears as a salient issue in Nnu Ego's family life. Unlike Ojebeta, Nnu Ego did not receive any education; however, when she came to Lagos, she realized that her society was changing and if a man wanted to avoid working as a servant or washer man for the whites, he had to do some learning so that he could have a "respectable" job and even earn a lot of money. For Nnu Ego who "had been brought up to believe that children made a woman"(p.219), Western education became a necessity to reach her dreams of having successful and rich children. Her first son, Oshia is the luckiest one because being the eldest son, it is his right to be educated and all his family is going to make sacrifices and almost starve to pay the expensive fees of his school.

In Lagos, the situation of girls was very similar to that of those living in Ibuza. Boys were still "rare commodities"(p.128) and were socialized to have a privileged position in their families. From his early age, Nnu Ego's son Oshia is told that he is "worth ten [girls]"(p.128) and from then, he started to behave as most traditional men did that is playing the role of the patriarch of the family. His twin sisters were at his service and even their future bride price was designated to be spent on his education. This is what one of Nnu Ego's relatives says: "If you are ever in a bad patch with boys' education, don't forget that the girls grow very quickly; the twins' bride price will help out"(p.180).

The school fees for Oshia became particularly difficult to find when Nnaife left for war. After staying for a long time in Ibuza to attend her father's funeral, Nnu Ego loses her stall in front of her room and starts to sell firewood. Under these hard financial conditions, the children start to participate in the earnings of the household;

however, girls suffer more than their brothers. In fact, while Oshia and his brother Adim were allowed to study, their sisters had to work all day. Like Ojebeta, Nnu Ego's twins, Kehinde and Taiwo start to attend some private lessons in which very little is learned, but after the departure of their father, even this little privilege is denied them for the sake of the boys' education. By doing so, Nnu Ego socializes her girls to sacrifice themselves for the men of their family as all girls are supposed to do. Nnu Ego's conversation with her daughters runs as follows:

But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell [foodstuff] to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you (p.176).

Despite this exclusion, when Nnu Ego's daughters are allowed to attend some private lessons, they were taught how to write properly, which and this was considered enough for a woman to secure an educated husband. However, when Nnu Ego could not have her husband's army money from the post office because of her illiteracy, she realized that she was "ill-prepared for a life like this, where only pen and not mouth could really talk"(p.179). In fact, literacy becomes a necessity to have access to the public sphere which is represented here by the post office. A lack of education would be responsible for the limitation of women's potential in society for they have to content themselves with the domestic life. Nnu Ego fails to educate her daughters and continues to convince herself that one day her grown up sons would secure a comfortable life for her, but the only joy she could have is to be called "A mother of clever children". She gradually comes to realize that she is going to gain nothing from this honour. After attending a school reserved for rich people, Oshia becomes very selfish and when he reaches a high degree that would allow him to get

a good job and help his poor family, he decides to leave Nigeria after obtaining a scholarship to study in the United States.

Indeed, Oshia corresponds to JanMohamed's description of the educated colonized man who chooses assimilation and finds himself "trapped in a form of historical catalepsy because colonial education severs him from his own past."¹⁶ Oshia rejects the values of his traditional society according to which the first son of the family had to take care of his old parents. He decides to live in America and in order to completely integrate the white man's culture, he marries a white American woman. Nnu Ego is shocked by his decision to leave the country and her sense of disillusion is great for after having spent a life time trying to secure her old age by educating her son, she is simply abandoned by this same son. Oshia forgets his mother's suffering and instead of rewarding her by improving her living conditions, he thinks only of his self-interest and even asks her parents to give him more money before he leaves the country.

Nnu Ego's male children's views are opposed to their parents and this allows Emecheta to question the traditional concepts of parenthood. They are swept into the changing values of Nigeria and privilege their self-interest. We find here a demythologization of the mother image because under the impact of change, mothers were gradually losing their sacred position in society. Many educated children refused to assume their traditional obligations towards the elders of their communities. Emecheta problematizes the difficulty of finding a balance between the individual's self-realization in society and his/her social obligations towards his/her parents. Individuation is not to be mistaken with selfishness and ingratitude. To

contrast Oshia's behaviour, Emecheta draws the character of one of Nnu Ego's friend's son. He is an educated man who offers his mother, Ma Abby a comfortable life after all the sacrifices that she made to ensure his education. He is an example of this balance that the individual can make to pursue his dreams without sacrificing the social ties with the members of his community.

After her son's departure, Nnu Ego at last understands the realities of her society which expects many sacrifices from women for the sake of their children:

I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standards expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband--and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? *We women* subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until *we* change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build (p.187). [emphasis added].

This passage which can be considered as an epiphany that comes at the end of Nnu Ego's experience in Lagos is one of the most effective feminist statements made by Emecheta. It makes of her novel a feminist work since it is said by a character who is supposed to adhere completely to the African patriarchal traditions which preach men's superiority and perceive women as inarticulate. Nnu Ego is conscious of her subordinate position and she is used by Emecheta as the mouthpiece of all the oppressed women. Omar Sougou notes the slippage from the first-person singular to the first-person plural in the last two sentences "indicating a moment when the two voices seem to converge."¹⁷ Emecheta's voice joins that of Nnu Ego and expresses directly her feminist message that rejects women's oppression and calls them to react against "the man's world." The pronoun "we" suggests that Emecheta, the woman as well as the writer identifies herself with African women and shares their despair.

Nnu Ego has hope in the future of her son who might one day become one of the élite that would rule Nigeria and this was the reward that she might have. Therefore, Nnu Ego refuses to face the reality and acknowledge that her life was wasted on a selfish son. Contrary to Nnu Ego, Adaku decides to give her daughters a full education and even send them to college because she realizes the importance of educating girls when she learns that some young women start to teach and earn money.

In Lagos an educated girl could bring a high bride price and Nnaife wants to make the best of this situation especially after his deception when Oshia refuses to share his earnings with the family. In fact, Nnaife was in need of money to spend on his new sixteen-year old wife who was freshly brought from Ibuza. The roles assigned to women by society remained the same with education because even educated men were satisfied with women who could bear children, cook and wash clothes. Taiwo marries an Igbo educated man who pays a good bride price for her, but her twin sister, Kehinde refuses the husband chosen by her father because she was in love with a young Yoruba man from a Muslim family. By reacting against the will of her father and by choosing to run away and join her lover, Kehinde is seen as a sinner by her people. She brings disgrace and dishonor to her father who decides to kill her lover, but he is immediately arrested by the police. This shows that even in a city like Lagos, and despite all the changes in society, a girl is not free to choose her future husband.

With a lot of irony, Emecheta makes of Nnu Ego's traditionalism the cause of Nnaife's imprisonment. Nnu Ego is summoned by the court of justice to be a witness

in her husband's case, but unwillingly she contributed to his condemnation. Nnaife claims that he has paid for his sons' school fees, but when Nnu Ego is asked the same question, she says that she paid them. To explain this contradiction, Nnu Ego answers: "Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pays"(p.217). Nnu Ego acknowledges her ownership by her husband and this scene is to be contradicted with the moments when Nnu Ego has feminist awareness to question her status. The critic Katherine Fishburn, describes the way Emecheta weaves two discourses in her narrative:

Although [Nnu Ego] occasionally has moments in which her internally persuasive discourse challenges the Voice of the Father, in this scene in particular what she thinks corresponds exactly with her culture's authoritative discourse.¹⁸

The culture's discourse is mediated by Nnu Ego herself since she continues to embody the values of her traditional society which according to her gives a man the right to own his wife. However, Nnu Ego's discourse is made amid laughter from the courtroom and this shows that the Nigerian society was changing. In fact, people who were present there could not understand Nnu Ego's conservatism at a time when the values of the Nigerian society had changed and this change is articulated by Adaku who observes: "Nnaife does not own anybody, not in Nigeria today"(p.218). However, Nnu Ego was late to understand this new reality and her life was ruined when Nnaife was sent to prison.

With a husband in jail and two sons abroad, Nnu Ego decides at last to regain Ibuza to be among her own people. But even then, Nnu Ego continues to suffer from the judgment of her society which condemns her as a "bad woman" because she has

contributed to Nnaife's imprisonment by saying the truth about paying her children's school fees. Nnu Ego, the mother of sons who believed that her old age could be happy after all the sacrifices she has made, dies alone by the side of the road without her children or friends.

In fact, like Ojebeta, Nnu Ego decides to leave the city in an attempt to find comfort among her people in Ibuza. Because of her stubbornness to cling to some traditions which were unfair, all her dreams of joy and peace become just aches. Nnu Ego spends her last days alone and the only little help she receives before she dies comes from her daughters. We may conclude that if Nnu Ego had believed in her daughters as Adaku did, may be she would have not been disappointed.

Her son Oshia builds a shrine in her name so that women who can not have children come to pray her to make them fertile. Emecheta shows that even after her death, Nnu Ego is remembered as a mother and not as an individual who has existed in society. People agree that her joy was that of sacrificing herself for her children and her only reward was a great funeral for which her dear son Oshia borrows a large sum of money to tell the world that he is a good son. Instead of helping his mother when she was in need, Oshia offered his money when she could not profit from it.

However, Nnu Ego refuses to answer the prayers of these women and for the critic Florence Stratton, this "gives Nnu Ego a final victory over the forces that have oppressed her."¹⁹ In fact, by refusing to grant children to barren women, Nnu Ego at last unites with her "chi" and like the slave woman, she starts to send messages to all the women who invoke her spirit that being a mother of sons is not the guarantee of a happy and successful life.

Ojebeta equally understands that although her husband freed her from the Palagadas, she remains owned by him since he pays her bride price. But, to be owned by a man of her tribe is for her a better choice. She even thanks "[her] new owner" for such honor. In the last scene of the novel which is supposed to mark the end of Ojebeta's slavery, the three forms of oppression that have objectified her are present: her brothers who represent the patriarchal order, Clifford who stands for the custom of domestic slavery and finally her husband Jacob who symbolizes traditional marriage. Clifford receives the money from Jacob and the narrator describes Ojebeta's joy:

Ojebeta giggled like a young girl of fifteen. For had she not been rightly valued? Would her mother Umeadi have wished another life for her daughter? Was the glory of a woman not a man, as the Ibuza people said? (p.184).

However, the reader may find that there is irony in these lines because Ojebeta has achieved no glory from her marriage. Clifford is shocked by the sight of Ojebeta who becomes "the ghost of the girl he had known so many years ago...the energetic, laughing [Ojebeta] was gone for ever"(p181). The final lines of the novel direct the reader to the conclusion that the traditional conception of marriage was a form of oppression for women. Emecheta closes her novel as follows:

So as Britain was emerging from war once more victorious, and claiming to have stopped the slavery she had helped to spread in all her black colonies, Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters (p.184).

The word "masters" refers here to the colonizer, the slave's owner as well as the husband and this may confirm our feminist reading of slavery as a metaphor for traditional marriage.

Notes:

1. Omar Sougou, **Writing across Cultures: Gender Politics and Difference in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta**. New York: Rodopi, 2002,pp.77-78.
2. Laretta Ngcobo, "*Four African Women Writers in Africa Today*". In **South African Outlook**. May, 1984, p. 64.
3. J. F, Ade Ajayi, **Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891 The Making of a New Élite**. Evanston: Northern University Press, 1969,p.1.
4. Frantz Fanon, **The Wretched of the Earth**. (tran. Constance Farrington, intro. Jean-Paul Sartre). Harmonds Worth: Penguin, 1967, p32.
5. Juliana Nfah Abbenyi, op.cit.,p.45.
6. Buchi Emecheta, op.cit.,p.175.
7. Alice Walker, op.cit.,p.243.
8. Obioma Nnaemeka, "*From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood*".In Abiola Irele(ed).**Research in African Literatures**. Vol.25,No.4. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994,p.147.
9. Patricia Mclean,"*How Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood Resists Feminist and Nationalist Readings*".2003.(www.otago.ac.nz/deep_south/2003_01/m.)
10. See, Buchi Emecheta, **Second-Class Citizen**. Glasgow: Fontana,1980. In this novel Emecheta recalls how difficult it was for her to attend school especially after the death of her father. Her mother was inherited by her uncle and all the money left by her father was to be spent on the education of her brother. Despite all these obstacles, Emecheta insisted on carrying on her education.
11. See Michael Crowder, **The Story of Nigeria**. London: Faber and Faber, p. 149.
12. Rose Ure Mezu, "*Women In Achebe's World*".(<http://www.uga.edu/~womanist/1995/mezu.htm1>)
13. Carole Davies Boyce, "*Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism*".In Carole Boyce Davies and Ann Adams Graves(eds). **Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature**. Trenton, NT: African World Press, 1986,p.2.
14. Omar Sougou, op. cit.,p.73.
15. Frantz Fanon, **Peau Noire, Masques Blancs**. Paris: Edition le Seuil, 1952, p.79.
16. Abdul R JanMohamed, "**Manichean Aesthetics**".p.5.
17. Omar Sougou, op.cit.,p. 104.
- 18.Katherine Fishburn, op.cit.,p.114.
19. Florence Stratton, "**Contemporary African**",p. 119.

Conclusion

In *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Slave Girl*, the two protagonists fail to reach self-fulfillment; Nnu Ego dies alone by the side of a road without a son to hold her hand while Ojebeta who succeeds to free herself from slavery falls in another form of entrapment represented by the traditional marriage. This denouement comes after a long journey through life in which the two women faced several dilemmas to adapt themselves to the changes they met in the city.

It is true that Nnu Ego wakes into consciousness by the end of the novel, but her feminist understanding does not lead her to happiness. Ojebeta's behaviour is equally ambivalent, for after her experiences with slavery and her courage to free herself from the Palagadas, we expect her to be an independent woman who refuses any kind of authority.

We may think that the writer opts for such endings to highlight the limits of choices that the Nigerian society offered to women during the colonial period. If we contextualize the stories of the two characters within the historical framework of the period, we can understand these endings. Traditional patriarchy and colonialism were yoked together as extremely strong forces against which women were helpless. Nnu Ego reaches several epiphanies in which she realizes her entrapment by the conventions of society, yet she is paralyzed by her fears, weaknesses and long years of socialization as a submissive member of the community. Her failure is the direct result of her internalization of the patriarchal values and blind adherence to traditions. She is equally an example of Sartrean concept of "Bad faith" which explains her choice to escape the hardships of her conditions and instead of facing

her problems as Adaku does, she continues to believe that her self-realization would come one day thanks to her children.

Ojebeta's identity is equally shaped by the social expectations of behavioural codes, but her life is further complicated by the experience of slavery. The long years of slavery in which she experiences dehumanization, degradation, and violence left irreversible impact on her identity. She internalizes slavery and this creates in her a sense of submissiveness which prevents her from reacting against the authority of her brothers and husband.

Ojebeta and Nnu Ego react differently to the changes brought by modernization. Nnu Ego fails to combine the values of the two environments in which she has lived that is, Ibuza and Lagos. Ojebeta, on the other hand accepts change, but her superficial vision of modernity does not make her reject the traditional construction of womanhood.

The conclusion that we may reach after comparing the experiences of Nnu Ego and Ojebeta is that Buchi Emecheta is critical of both contexts. In fact, the writer does not use a facile country/town dichotomy because she neither idealizes the good old days of the tribe, nor completely rejects life in modern and urban places. In some points of the novels, Emecheta assumes an African perspective and praises some aspects of traditional life, and in other parts, the feminist voice of the narrator is critical of other traditions. Indeed, Emecheta gives an objective outlook of her society without trying to embellish it.

For the critic Katherine Frank, slavery in Emecheta's novels is a metaphor standing for the real status of these women since "slavery....is for [her] the inherent

condition of African women."¹ The critic even concludes that there is no possibility of liberating these women if they continue to cling to their traditions which she considers inherently sexist: "the notion of a liberated African woman is a contradiction in terms. There is an irremediable antagonism between the African woman's identity as an African and as a woman."² To emancipate them, Frank insists on the importance of Western education which may raise their feminist consciousness and open their eyes to their rights. It is true that Emecheta blames some traditions which limited the potential of women, but she equally shows that the situation of Nigerian women under colonialism was not better and the Western values that were introduced were not necessarily liberating as Frank may claim. Traditionally, women had often substantial wealth, and at least a measure of economic security and certain independence from their husbands. All this was lost with colonialism. Therefore, we can assume that slavery as presented by Emecheta does not stand only as a metaphor for the entrapment of women by some traditions, but also for the colonial authority with its Victorian values that excluded women from public life.

Many critics treated the double-voiced narrative in Emecheta's novels that appears sometimes nostalgic and sometimes critical of traditions. Chikwenyi Okonjo Ogunyemi has noted that Emecheta's "viewpoint shifts between shame and pride in her people...Her ambivalence reveals an English strain in her attitude towards life, a strain in constant conflict with her Africanness."³ Other critics like Omar Sougou do not see this double-voiced discourse as a conflict of identity, but rather as a natural aspect that characterizes the works of many African women writers who show "anger

and revolt of a feminist thinking writer against gendered societal norms harmful to the female subject, yet a feeling of belonging to the society under attack."⁴ These antagonist views about Emecheta's representation of African traditions have animated many debates concerning the feminist aspect of her novels.

The Joys of Motherhood and *The Slave Girl* can be considered as feminist novels because they treat the implications of power relationships for gender. Systems like patriarchy granted men an absolute control of society and women are automatically seen as the "second sex". In both novels, all the female characters are considered as men's "others" within the patriarchal order. Each man uses his authority as a husband, a father or a brother to impose his will on women. All feminists have rejected this conception of woman as the "second sex" who must exist always in relation to men and in doing so with her characters, it can be claimed that Emecheta gives a feminist approach to power and gender relations in her society. Moreover, the interpretation of the depicted images of women and representations of female experiences in her works allow us to have a better understanding of women's status. Feminism aims at the deconstruction of images that stereotyped women and this can be applied to Emecheta's female representations through which she questions many feminist issues.

First, the institution of motherhood that aims at placing women under male control is one of these stereotypes. Through the tragedy of Nnu Ego, Emecheta deconstructs the essentialist biological definition of womanhood as motherhood. She reacts against the traditional over-idealization of the mother role especially when it is considered as the only defining feature of a woman's identity without which, she is

stripped of her femininity. We should note here that Emecheta does not reject motherhood, but rather the traditional cultural construction of this institution which puts women in a narrow framework that grants them little individual possibilities.

The traditional construction of marriage is also criticized, especially those forms that transformed women into living objects handed from father to husband. Emecheta rejects the idea of ownership that gives men all the rights over their wives. The relationships between Nnu Ego and Nnaife in *The Joys of Motherhood* and Ojebeta and Jacob in *The Slave Girl* are not based on love and respect. It is clear that in both couples, the husbands have a complete authority while the wives have to show obedience. This kind of marriage destroys a woman's belief in her individual potential since she depends on her husband's will. Hence, Emecheta deconstructs the stereotype of the obedient traditional wife who is happy with her status.

Feminism deals also with images of men. Emecheta deconstructs the traditional representation of men as the absolute holders of power. The god-like images of the father and husband are put into question through the character of Nnaife in *The Joys of Motherhood*. His authority is challenged several times in the novel by his wife, Nnu Ego who fails to respect him because he accepts to be mastered by a white woman. He loses his status as the patriarch of the family in consequence of the changes in his society. His children, Oshia and Kehinde represent the new generation which dares to break the sacred authority of the traditional father when they overtly repudiate his orders. Oshia refuses to stop his studies and provide for the family while Kehinde does not accept to marry a man of Nnaife's choice.

To conclude, we can claim that Emecheta's perception of feminism can be found in her construction of the two feminist characters of Ona and Adaku. Indeed, Ona who lives in the highly patriarchal society of Ibuza, challenges the status quo by her refusal to accept the authority of the powerful Agbadi. She does not accept the submissiveness that Agbadi's wives have and refuses wifehood even after the death of her father. Ona and Agbadi's relationship which is based on love and not on ownership because of the absence of the bride price is presented by Emecheta as a possible form of marriage which does not necessarily crush a woman's individuality. We can conclude that Ona and Agbadi's relation corresponds to de Beauvoir's concept of reciprocity in which we acknowledge the debt we owe to the other's freedom as interdependent. The individual's freedom presupposes the social relation, and the individual's capacity to act ethically depends on his/her recognition of her/his dependence on the other's freedom. By claiming her reciprocal recognition as the subject, Ona transcends her status as the other. Both Agbadi and Ona set themselves as Subjects.

To contrast Ona, Emecheta places Adaku in an urbanized modern context. This woman has feminist consciousness that allows her to adopt a non-conformist behaviour when she decides to live as an independent single mother. She is described by Eustace Palmer as an effective feminist character who is "the forerunner of women's liberation in Africa"⁵. However, it must be noted that both women have never rejected their roles of mothers which seems for Emecheta an important aspect of their femininity.

By questioning an established status quo with its male chauvinism and patriarchal conception of rigid sex roles with the over-glorification of motherhood, Emecheta supports a feminist stance because of her belief in the individuality of every woman. Her writings bear an undeniable emphasis on the need for change to erase all gender inequities so that a woman becomes what Nnu Ego hopes: a "full human being, not anybody's appendage"(p.186).

Notes

- 1- Katherine Frank. *"The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta"*.In. **World Literature Written in English**,21,1982,p.485.
- 2- Ibid., p.492.
- 3- Ogunyemi Chikwenye Okonjo. *"Buchi Emecheta: The Shaping of a Self"*.In **Komparatische Hefte** 8(1983), p. 65.
- 4- Omar Sougou. op.cit., p.89
- 5- Eustace Palmer. op.cit., p. 49.

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سعي المرأة الإفريقية لتحقيق ذاتها ما بين الحداثة و التقاليد في روايتي : الفتاة

المستعبدة و افراح الامومة للكاتبة النيجرية بوتشي إمينشيتا

ملخص

تطرقنا في هذا البحث إلى وضعية المرأة في المجتمع النيجيري خلال الفترة الاستعمارية الممتدة من أواخر القرن التاسع عشر إلى غاية 1960 من خلال دراسة الشخصيات النسائية في روايتي الفتاة المستعبدة و افراح الامومة للكاتبة النيجيرية بوتشي إمينشيتا.

الإشكالية المطروحة في هذا البحث تدور حول بناء شخصية المرأة النيجيرية ما بين الحداثة والتقاليد عن طريق التطرق إلى مختلف العوامل التي أثرت على وضعها في المجتمع التقليدي المتمثل في المحيط القروي أين تظهر سيطرة الرجل على مختلف مجالات الحياة في حين أن الحداثة تتمثل في حياة المدينة التي تتميز بتغيرات في المجالين الإقتصادي و الاجتماعي.

أما في ما يتعلق بخطة البحث فهي تعتمد على تقسيم العمل إلى جزئين رئيسيين:

* الجزء الأول يتضمن دراسة حياة المرأة التقليدية في المجتمع القروي و التطرق إلى مختلف الأدوار الموكلة إليها و بالأخص دورها كزوجة و أم , إلى جانب دراسة بعض التقاليد التي من شأنها إعاقة تحقيق المرأة لوضعية مساوية للرجل في الحقوق و الواجبات.

* الجزء الثاني يعتمد على إنتقال الشخصيات الرئيسية إلى العيش في المدينة أين تظهر التجربة الإستعمارية كأهم عامل مؤثر في تغيير حياة المرأة لذلك تمت دراسة الوجود الإستعماري إلى جانب مخلفاته من ديانة , تعليم , ونظم سياسية , اقتصادية, و إجتماعية جديدة

كان الهدف من هذا البحث الوصول إلى إمكانية إدراج روايات بوتشي إمينشيتا إلى الأدب النسوي بسبب تعرضها إلى قضايا المرأة في مجتمعها و النتيجة كانت و من شأنها أن تؤثر على تحقيق المرأة الإفريقية لذاتها ووجودها كفرد فعال في المجتمع له كيانه المستقل عن الرجل.

