

## Looking Backwards: Slavery and Abject in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*

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**Abstract:** *Emecheta introduces yet another myth to the theory of slavery through the novel. It was ardently believed that no woman was ultimately free until she had paid what she owed to her masters as a slave. She must be free from debts if she wishes to free herself from the shackles of slavery. Ojebeta therefore miscarried after the birth of two of her daughters. She is reminded of the unpaid debt she owed when being a slave. Dibia insists that her debt remains unfinished and therefore she must pay back what was left back as debt. Ojebeta though freed herself from the chains of slavery is still bound in the chains of culture and tradition. Clifford, the son of Ma Palagada, comes back to reclaim Ojebeta as his slave. He stands astonished when he could not see the Ojebeta who used to be the most gracious and the most intelligent during her stay with them. She has now become an obsolete woman who is indecisive and lost luster in the course of time.*

**Key Words:** *Backwards, Slavery, Abject, myth.*

*The Slave Girl* is a double award winning, and Emecheta's fourth novel, that explores the pre-colonial Africa, a novel that travels time to reach a historic time when Africa was under the control of Portugal. The novel investigates the changing role of women, especially Nigerian women with the change of time. The central character, Ojebeta is named after Emecheta's mother. The name of her maternal uncle is Okolie Okwuekwu which is partly assigned to her father, who is called Okwuekwu and the rest designated to her brother, Okolie.

The reason for giving names of members in the same family is to create a family saga of women's enslavement as a chain reaction to testify a man's selfishness and over powering nature to enslave a woman in a family. The theme of slavery dealt within the family earned the novel acclaims, accolades and awards. Ketu.H. Kattrack quotes, M.K. Gandhi's embodiment of reflection on women where he says, "To me, the female sex is not the weaker sex, it is the nobler of the two, for it is even today, the embodiment of sacrifice, humility, silent suffering, faith and knowledge" (23). One has to understand that the novel has had its part in travelling time where the author has tried to create an ideal childhood for her own mother for, she could not create her mother's childhood as a reality. Another prominent segment in the novel is the fact that the plight of a colonial nation like India and Africa does ring a bell in the minds of the readers. Both the countries have always tried their best to cling on to the roots and traditions and therefore have forced women to be a subservient slave to men. It is therefore a necessary evil for women to become more obedient because, the society wants a woman to be safer by being slavish than become someone who wants to be shunned in the name of modernity.

The novel takes an attempt to unveil the political and economic dependence of Nigeria in the trading of slaves, historically and domestically. The enslavement of women nationally hampers and arrests her development not only physically but also emotionally and psychologically. The slave drama, enacted in every single family begins with trust and ends with betrayal. The enslavement of women makes them mere entities that clearly explicate the bleak and benign forms of patriarchy. The word, enslavement is ambiguous and ambivalent in the novel. On the one side, the slaves have access to better reading, writing and sewing. They are modernized, westernized and rechristened by giving them a more congenial atmosphere in the wearing of dresses, though they are more preferential towards the wearing of lappa, their ethnic wear. They are given a label of second-class citizenship only next to the male slaves.

Ojebeta, is sold a slave by her own brother to attain his selfish needs of attending an event. Being a slave gave her a varied experience of working hard as well as being treated harsh which contributed to her growth and development. She was surfeited being a slave and would have lived a life of complete surrender and submission to slavery had she not marry. However, she was thrust into a wed- lock for, women then, were forbidden to choose or decide upon their future. Eventually, Ojebeta accepted to the life of a slave to her husband more of a choice than of a chance. The innocence of Ojebeta is presented in the novel where she does not know about the fact that she was to be sold in the market as a commodity for she was a girl, more importantly, a slave girl. Emecheta describes her innocent short-lived happiness as

Just like a hunter's arrow that had been quivering impatiently in its bow while the hunter covered his prey until the opportune moment to let it fly, so did Ogbanjo Ojebeta dash out of the Palagada cloth stall. She ran, almost flew like an arrow, her little legs like wings her heart beating fast in fear and in anticipation. (56)

Ojebeta's change of ownership from Ma Palagada to Jacob, her husband, designates the historic change of slave masters from the Portuguese to the British. The novel differentiates the terms independence and freedom. During the close of the novel, Ojebeta becomes free and returns to Ibuza, for a while. After which, she marries Jacob and continues her slave legacy. Emecheta emphasizes that freedom for Nigerian women is transitory. They can only be free, that too for a short span of time but never independent. She also asserts that no woman can be completely free and therefore independence for them is no conceivable possibility. Emecheta also adds that the progress of a country can only be possible with the prosperity of women. The crests and troughs of Ojebeta becomes more symbolic to the career graph of a woman writer, especially Emecheta which vacillates between highs and lows.

The story of the novel, begins roughly in the early 1900s during the beginning of the turn of the new century. It was a time, when British colonizers set foot in Africa as tradesmen and businessmen. The British officials were afflicted with Malaria and the Ibos, Okwekwu made a mark by saving the life of a British official by carrying him on his shoulder back and restored his life and health. As a token of gratitude, the British officer gave him the job of a court emissary. He carried out orders of the court but was never able to pronounce the word, order and therefore the word, Oda, curtailed as order, was added to his name, the resultant name being, Oda Okwekwu.

The fortune of gaining employment made him witness another joyous moment in his life. His wife, Umeadi, gave birth to one more child and the child survived. The story of her survival marked an influential turn to the makings of the story of the novel. As early as, 1916, there was a gas attack that made her an orphan. Her older brother, left their family to work for a white man. The younger brother, who was idle sold her as a slave to one of their relatives. She stayed there for a period of nine years learning much manners and refinement. Ibuza would not have made Ojebeta as what she was after her nine-year confinement. Following, the imminent demise of her owner, she returned home succumbing to strict taboos and traditions. She was bought back from the family of Palagada, following the norms of the tradition only to be married and made a lifelong slave to her husband, Jacob. The author wants to establish the fact that the slavery of a girl is a vicious circle, she travels from one hell to another and her suffering never does cease. Catherine Mackinnon observes the saddened and the helpless plight of women as quoted by Robert Fatten as

If seizures of state and productive power overturn work relations, they do not overturn sex relations, at the same time or the same way, as a class analysis of sex would predict...neither technology nor socialism, both of which purport to alter women's role at a point of production, have never yet equalized woman's status relative to men. In the feminist view, nothing has changed. (49)

Ojebeta was christened Alice as a measure to make her more westernized and civilized. She had no more traditional Ibo affiliations henceforth and hence became a thorough Christian. Ojebeta survived death and therefore special steps were taken by dibia to improve her bodily constitution. She clinged on to her mother until she was completely nourished back to health. On being sold as a slave, she took three years to learn the nuances of her assigned work at the house of her master, Ma Palagada. The name palagada signified nothing but the way she sounded when she walked. As time passed, the sound of her gait, became her identity and her name for all the slave women. She is shown as a very influential woman who had formed trade ties with the French and the Portuguese in the western coast of Africa.

Ma Palagada was a concubine, like most other women then were. Ma Palagada was a concubine to a Portuguese sailor who left her much fortune when he left Africa for Portugal. She maintained powerful connections and contacts to enhance her enterprise thereafter. Ma Palagada has two symbolic representations. Firstly, she is one of those many Ibo women who was an opportunist and upgraded herself economically. Second, she belonged to the business segment of Igbo women who prospered in the realm of business and rose up to the level of a tax payer although she evaded tax paying. She was a thorough bred capitalist, a precursor to Christian conversion and a staunch supporter of colonial policies. Mr and Mrs. Simpson are shown the direct propagandists of the religion from the west. Mrs. Simpson spread the gospel and her husband established the trade center to expand Britain's business territories.

Ojebeta is glorified by Emecheta as a martyr, partly because she was her mother herself embalmed in the fictional reality of the novel. The story begins when Ojebeta was an infant, roughly during 1900 and spans across forty-five years, inferring her age as 45 years during the close of the novel. The locale is a clan of nine villages erected by the prince Umejei and the formative eight years of her youth are spent in Onitsha, the famous market place. Her mannerisms and refinement reflect her dreams of marrying a man of European emulation. He therefore rejected suitors who were

simpletons and found Jacob as the ideal man who fit the bill of marriage appropriately. To her, Jacob was a cut above the rest. Ojebeta did not resort to the ideals of prostitution, elopement with the non natives, violating the stringent customs of the Ibo clan unlike Aku-nna. She purposely did not put herself to much westernization because, she was afraid of being ostracized by their community. When the novel ends, Ojebeta does not employ her Christian conventions and the elitist elegance when she is married to Jacob. Her coda becomes complete surrender, unmindful of her ways of being a model slave at the house of Ma Palagada.

The Slave Girl also describes the horrors of sexual abuse and exploitation of the slaves which are considered the byproducts of the system of enslavement. Chlago, the most senior among the slaves becomes the voice of sexual oppression. She felt disgusted and dejected every time when Pa Palagada slipped his hands into her blouse as a token of sexual gratification. These girls had none to bring forth the issue of sexual degeneration. It was often kept under curtain. Even Ma Palagada, who was amiable and soft spoken did not intervene in the matters of sexual assault although she treated these girls like daughters than slaves.

Emecheta introduces yet another myth to the theory of slavery through the novel. It was ardently believed that no woman was ultimately free until she had paid what she owed to her masters as a slave. She must be free from debts if she wishes to free herself from the shackles of slavery. Ojebeta therefore miscarried after the birth of two of her daughters. She is reminded of the unpaid debt she owed when being a slave. Dibla insists that her debt remains unfinished and therefore she must pay back what was left back as debt. Ojebeta though freed herself from the chains of slavery is still bound in the chains of culture and tradition. Clifford, the son of Ma Palagada, comes back to reclaim Ojebeta as his slave. He stands astonished when he could not see the Ojebeta who used to be the most gracious and the most intelligent during her stay with them. She has now become an obsolete woman who is indecisive and lost luster in the course of time.

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