

Voice Of A Slave Woman: A Study On Buchi Emecheta's The Slave Girl

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Cite this paper as: Blessy, Dr. V. Amutha (2024). Voice Of A Slave Woman: A Study On Buchi Emecheta's The Slave Girl. *Frontiers in Health Informatics*, 13 (5) 886-887

Abstract

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta is Africa's most prolific female writer. Emecheta novels portray the life of African women and their struggle to succeed in an exploitative male dominated traditional Nigerian society. Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1977) explores the concept of enslavement. There is a clear message in the novel, which refers to the permanent slave condition of women in Nigeria. This paper focus on the novel deals with how women are treated as slaves and mistreated. Women are exploited and oppressed by the male dominated society. Through, the portrait of Ogbanje Ojebeta, the heroine of the novel Emecheta portrays slavery. Ojebeta, was sold into slavery by his own brother in need of money to serve his own selfish needs. However, her time as a slave, despite the hard work and sometimes-harsh treatment, is a period of great personal development. Women are not allowed to decide their own future. Ojebeta shaves her head in order to escape the possibility of enforced marriage. She too asserts her freedom in the choice of her marriage partner.

Key Words: Salvery. Male domination, exploitation

African world is still a very male dominated world, and female authors who dare to speak out about the condition of women in Africa have a tough, uphill road ahead of them. Women in male authored books do not occupy centre stage. They usually play secondary roles. They are just background figures. Women's Writing always questioned male constructs like marriage and family. Women are seen and presented from male point of view and from the view of social Emecheta has presented women in different roles in both the traditional and immigrant societies. Like Achebe she too is greatly concerned about the Igbo Culture. To her Igbo is an emotional tongue full of proverbs and saying reflecting ancestral wisdom. She is conscious of black woman's awareness of racial and gender discrimination Buchi Emecheta has been disowned by several African male authors and critics for being too bold in her portrayal of women character in her novels. In this respect she challenges the point of view of her compatriot, Chinua Achebe, in whose novels African history and traditions are celebrated but women's issues are marginalized and the practice of polygamy, bride price and domestic violence are ignored. She has popularized African Women's issues in the west and carved out a space for black women with feminist fiction. In an interview with Julie Homles, Emechetasays: "If I was not to perish here, I realized that I find something I was good at my books are about survival, just like my own life." (The voice).

One of Emecheta's main themes involving slavery is the assertion that in Nigerian society, all women are enslaved to and by men. Ogbanje Ojebeta is the heroine of the novel. Her parents suddenly die of "felenze". At the age of seven Ojebeta becomes an orphan. Ojebeta's brother Okolie decides to sell her because he needs money to purchases carves anklets and beads for his coming-of-age dance costume. Okolie sells Ojebeta to a distant relative, a wealthy trader named

Ma Palagada who lives far away from Ibuza in Onitsha and gets Eight English pounds. He sacrifices her childhood by selling her into slavery. In an instant, Ojebeta's future is no longer guided by heartfelt promises of love and attention but by insistent demands for labour and service. Ojebeta's childlike attributes contrast highly with the treatment she remains as a woman and a slave.

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

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

When Ojebeta returns back to Ibuza she was joyfully and cordially welcomed by the natives. In a short period of the time he understands that she is projected and even more deeply stuck into the traditional way of life. As she is brought up in Onitsha, she is unprepared for the traditional life. She is frightened when she adapts the custom of any man could cut off a lock of hair from a girl's head and make her his wife forever. As this is an officially allowed custom and as there was no chance to object it, she agrees to shave off every last vestige of hair on her head. Ogbanje understands that though her breakdowns the chains of slavery, she is not yet free. She was quiet a slave to the traditions and customs. Ojebeta decides to marry Jacob but her mutual father, uncle Eze objects her choice. He secretly plans to marry her to his cousin by practicing the custom of cutting off a hair lock of Ojebeta. Ojebeta and Jacob love each other. She kneels before Jacob and confesses, 'I could not wish for a better master' (184). So they planned to elope, by disobeying the Ibuza tradition.

Emecheta exposes the injustices and sufferings inflicted upon women by traditional customs and mores. Such customs are actually institutionalized forms of male domination. Emecheta forces her women characters to break the laws of culture and make them to breath freedom.

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