

*Dehumanization and Displacement in  
The Slave Girl*

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### Chapter III

#### Dehumanization and Displacement in *The Slave Girl*

Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* expounds Ibo cultural beliefs and tradition values. It is a fictionalized narration of Ogbanje Ojebeta's life. She was sold as a slave by her brother as he needed money to buy a silk head tie to be worn for his cultural dance. The novel narrates the tragic life of Ojebeta who was the treasured daughter of Okwuekwu and Umeadi because many of their children died in infancy. She was born after much worship and sacrifices. They had two sons, but innately they longed for a baby girl. When Umeadi gets pregnant again, Okwuekwu was found "praying inwardly to Oboshi, the river goddess of their town Ibuza, to help his wife this time. He would have liked a baby girl..." (TSG 14).

The novel opens on a morning of a fine day, Okwuekwu was about to leave with his sons to his farm as usual when Umeadi was about to deliver her baby. His elder son Owezim observing his mother's restlessness doubtfully asks his father "should not one of us stay at home today just in case mother needs help?" (TSG 16). When Umeadi hears their conversation, sends away her sons and husband saying, "Are there no women in our class anymore? Have I become a coward who cannot give birth to a child?" (TSG 16).

Umeadi is courageous to deliver her baby without any one's help. Soon after they leave their house, Umeadi gets labour pain and she lays down the banana leaves that she had cut earlier to have her child. She calls her neighbour, wife of Ukabegwu for assistance, as she was the only person who remained at home on that day to help her. Unfortunately, she could not come to help her because "... it was her time of month . . ." (TSG 17).

There is a custom in the town of Ibuza that an unclean woman cannot enter the hut of a man with the title “*Alo*” (TSG 17), as Okwuekwu has such a title, she could not help Umeadi. This type of taboos and superstitious beliefs are followed in Ibuza. However critical the circumstance may be the people of Ibuza abide by it strictly. So, Umeadi comes out and kneels down on the banana leaves in front of her hut and Ukabegwu’s wife stretches out her hands to catch the baby and she uses a sharp knife to separate the baby from the mother.

Umeadi did not send a word to her husband or to her sons because the Ibuza women consider childbirth as a very common occurrence. Umeadi is content to learn that she has given birth to a baby girl for whom they desired for, but felt unhappy because whenever a girl baby is born to her, the baby dies within a short span of time. Her belief that her personal god [*Chi*] will provide her a girl baby and help the new born baby survive this time makes her gather all her strength, so Umeadi runs to the house of “*tibia*” (TSG 18), there the Native doctor assures her:

Your child will stay this time if you tie her with safety Charms. These must consist of cowries, tops of tins brought here by the Potokis, and real bells made from metal. You see, she has an agreement with her friends in the land of the dead, to keep coming and mocking you. But this time she seems impressed by your hospitality and wants to remain here as long as she can. It is our duty to make her stay as long as possible, until she is grown enough to reject her friends. Then they will no longer have any effect on her. (TSG 18)

The native doctor - Tibia provides hope to Umeadi. She is overwhelmed with joy when the “*tibia*” confirms that the trinkets should remain on the newborn baby girl until she is able to declare to her friends in the land of death, “Go away. I am happy here. I don’t want to belong to your world” (TSG 18). The thought of saving the life of the child makes Umeadi run frantically without caring that she is still losing blood heavily as she has delivered her baby recently. When she reaches home safely, then she sends a message to her husband through a male runner. Emecheta explicitly brings out the heroism, competence and strong will power of the Ibuza women.

A pregnant Ibuza woman simply carries a cooking knife with her, because, in case she gives birth to her baby on her way to or from the market or farm, she can cut the cord herself or if she is lucky she can find someone on the way, rest a while and then put her new baby on her back and reach her way home. As a result of such incidents, many people bear names such as “Uzo Onitsha – “born on the way to Onitsha market” – and Nwa Oboshi – “born on the way to the Oboshi river.”” (TSG 19)

In their culture, girl children were not desired, since Ojebeta’s parents had lost girl children born to them earlier they considered her precious. Her father is even ready to travel to a dangerous place called Idu to purchase magical charms to safeguard Ojebeta. Special intricate facial tattoos were drawn to ensure that she will remain alive. In Ibuza it is extremely rare that a daughter’s birth is celebrated in such a magnitude. When Ojebeta was about seven years old the African continent was affected by a strange disease called the white man’s “*felenza*” (influenza) (TSG 25). The natives believed that the presence of Europeans in their native land was the cause of the disease.

The natives describe the epidemic in their own words as:

Pom! Pom! Pom! The rumours that have been going round are true. Pom! There is a kind of death coming from across the salty waters. It had killed many people in Iseb Azagba, it is creeping to Ogwashi, and it is now coming to us. They call it Felenza. It is white man's death. They shoot it into the air, and we breathe it in and die. Pom! Pom... (TSG 25)

The people of Ibuza are terrifically afraid and innocently pray that they should be spared by the disease. "But this felenza was a new thing that the "Potokis" had shot into the air, though everyone wondered why. "We have done them no wrong," people said. They came to places like Benin and Bonny, bought healthy slaves from our people and paid us well. And this is how they thank us" (TSG 26).

Slowly the deadly disease "felenza" came to Ogwashi, and within few days, many people were dead. People were too shocked as "... that the felenza had carried away the men who were men; what they were left with were the ghosts of men" (TSG 26). The native and primitive men of Africa did not have medical care to treat the disease, so many people and children died. The protagonist Ojebeta's father died of influenza. After the death of her father, her mother Umeadi was bound to observe the period of mourning according to Igbo tradition. During her mourning period, she was also affected by influenza and died. According to their custom, she was denied a burial and her body was thrown into bad bush where no one can visit.

Umeadi mourned for her husband, and whenever Okolie could take time off from his dance practice he would come and fetch water for his widowed mother, for

while in mourning she was forbidden to visit the stream, to bathe, to enter any hut where the man of the family had a title. In fact a woman in mourning was not really expected to survive long after the death of her husband, though miraculously many widows did, perhaps because most wives were very much younger than their husbands and had that built-in resistance which only youth and a determination to live can provide. And Umeadi like many another woman might have survived had not her resistance been lowered by the very gas that killed her husband. (TSG 28)

African natives believe in superstitions. They believed that Ojebeta's mother might need some home appliances when she reaches the land of death, this shows the ignorance of the people. Ojebeta's aunt prepares utensils, "To be buried with your mother. She will need them to cook for your father in the land of the dead. Look, I have even filled a big calabash with soap for her, so that she will never lack any" (TSG 29).

The girl, who was the most desired asset of her parents and who was provided with all sorts of charms to prevent her from going away to the other world or never to be sold, started to face all types of ordeals that she had never dreamt of in her life. Neither the Ogbanje charms that could frighten the evils away could help her survive nor could her parent's bountiful love help her to overcome her sufferings. All these unfortunate incidents were a clear indication that she would be exploited.

Shortly after the death of her parents, she was left in the care of her younger brother, Okolie. Life became hard for both Ojebeta and Okolie. He is a perfect young teenage hero of his commune. He had to make all decisions because of his parents' sudden demise and his elder brother's absence. Okolie was also growing up and his

“coming-of-age” dance festival was approaching. So, he needed money to celebrate the joyous occasion and had to prove himself heroic by wearing colourful dresses and had to give a sumptuous treat to his friends during the auspicious occasion.

Okolie’s dire need of money and his excessive desire for dance made him think of selling his young innocent sister to Ma Palagada, to buy stuff for his coming of age dance. He doesn’t reveal his secret decision to his near and close relatives, since Igbo community is a place where people are closely united and every lady takes up the role of the mother when the children become orphans. One fine morning, her brother urged her to be ready before the sunrise. Walking with astonishment never knowing what is going to happen next, Ojebeta with her brother Okolie, reached a thick forest away from Ibuza which leads to Onitsha. “It was as if they were being gradually but nonetheless determinedly swallowed by a dark, mysterious, all green world, the world of which were enveloping them, fencing them in, closing them up.” (TSG 31)

The journey symbolises that Ojebeta is going to be entrapped in this intensive darkness and from this moment her individuality will vanish. When they reached Onitsha, they were bewildered by the things that were exhibited in the Otu Onitsha market, which is considered to be the nerve - centre of many villages around. After a little struggle, the rustic Okolie is able to find their relative Ma Palagada’s stall. She is an efficient trader in that area. The frightening market woman, Ma Palagada originally became the sweetheart of a Portuguese man at her young age and started the slave trade. When he left for his country, he left enormous assets for the two daughters born to him. Ma Palagada, later married Pa Palagada and a son was born to him. She invested money in a clever way, and expanded her trade. Without a doubt, she is a skilful person in trading and in making profit.

Ma Palagada did not want to have her business dealing before the other slave girls in her shop, so she drives Okolie to a hotel where drinks are sold. She could understand the greedy behaviour of the Okolie from the initial talk. Though she feels pity for her young relative, she is strict in her business and at one point she drops the money purposefully and makes Okolie to gather money lying on the ground to portray his avaricious attitude. He searches every corner in the hotel for the money. “In the intensity of his search he forgot his dignity, forgot what it was he had done. All the human pride he had ... pride that he was a man, pride that he was the best horn blower of his age-group, pride that he was Ibuza’s greatest orator - all was submerged in his urge to find money, and more money” (TSG 73).

Okolie sells his sister for the minimum price to buy a costume for the traditional *Ulolco* – a ceremony showing that he has now become an adult. After a brilliant negotiation between Ma Palagada and Okolie, the seven-year-old girl was sold for eight pounds. In a society where the patriarchal culture dominates, the brother who is not ready to take care of his own sister was allowed to sell her. The irony is that, Ojebeta’s mother tried to protect her daughter from with “safety charms, the bells and cowrie shells that jingled and clanged when she made the slightest movement” (TSG 18) but it ends in vain.

All over her features were traced intricate tattoos, the pattern of spinach leaves, with delicate branches running down the bridge of her nose, spreading out on her forehead and ending up at the top of her ears. On each cheek was drawn the outline of a large spinach leaf looking ready to be picked. It was not that many Igbos did not have facial tribal marks of different kinds, rather that few would have put so many on the face of one little girl. But Ojebeta's mother Umeadi,



when she realized that her daughter was going to live, had a reason for going to the expense of engaging the services of the most costly face-marker in Ibuza. For, with such a riot of tribal spinach marks on her only daughter's face, no kidnapper would dream of selling her into slavery. What was more, if she got lost her people would always know her, for although the patterns on her face might seem madness here to these Igbos from the East who frequented out Onitsha market, among the Western Igbos called the Aniochas it was a distinctive and meaningful design. (TSG 45)

Ojebeta believes her brother so much that she is so confident that her brother is there for her to look after her. The painful truth is that he sells her as a slave. The most touching chapters in the novel is the moment Ojebeta realises that her brother has betrayed her. Her love for her brother and her trust is clearly proved when she was provided food by Ma Palagada's slave girls, though she was feeling hungry after that tiresome long travel, she was not ready to eat it, because she likes to share the food with her brother and wanted to eat it together. Okolie considered money more important than his sister. He sold his pretty little orphaned sister for the sake of his own personal happiness. Ojebeta is not ready to accept the betrayal of her brother but soon realises that there is no means of escape, she surrenders herself to the situation.

Ma Palagada introduced Ojebeta to other slave girls, she observes that the girls were scared of their owner. As soon as they purchase a slave the masters destroy the sense of individuality and make them feel to be a mere thing. Accordingly, Chiago, the oldest of all the girl slaves was ordered to take Ojebeta to destroy her identity. Chiago

takes her to the nearby native man to remove her charms, Ojebeta requests Chiago to allow her to keep the charms and cowries that her parents had tied round her neck.

Chiago who is a slave herself, is powerless but feels sympathy for Ojebeta. “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 shred of self-respect she still had” (TSG 72).

Chiago thought for a while and allowed Ojebeta to keep her charms and cowries secretly. Later “with the painful” “removal of charms that symbolise in part Ojebeta’s selfhood, her sense of identity, she manages to keep them as a guide and reminder of her home in Ibuza” by hiding them in her “*npe*,” (TSG 68) - a type of garment. She hides and kept it safely as a symbol of her self-identity, they give her a hope of connecting herself with her early childhood. If the charm is removed she would lose her identity and become a slave, but she is satisfied that the facial tattoos could not be taken away from her and it would prove that she is an Igbo. Soon she learns that Chiago, and the other slave girls of the Palagadas, had migrated from far away places. Ojebeta remembers her own birth place and her parents and she longs to go to her native place.

Ojebeta was one of the few Palagada girls lucky enough to be able to remember who her people were and to have been old enough to be able to recall the first love her parents had showered over her. Over the years such thoughts had magnified and grown right inside her head until that whole time before she was sold now seemed completely golden in her mind's eye. (TSG 132)

The slaves were contented because they will get enough food, a place to sleep and have clothes to cover their bodies which they will not get if they have been with their own family. Some of the slaves were happy as their basic needs were fulfilled without understanding that they have lost their self-identity. They have surrendered their self-respect and their freedom to their masters. Chiago says, “Her family would certainly have starved had she not been sold to this man, Pa Palagada, who had later handed Chiago to his wife. It was a blessing that at least her stomach had been sold with her, so her parents would no longer have to worry about how to feed her; and perhaps the money her head had fetched had helped her family for a while” (TSG 61). The slaves totally forget their identity which could be identified in the speech of young slave girl Amanna.

This is our house, Amanna pointed out with pride and enthusiasm; so great was her adaptation and acceptance that she obviously really did look on it as her home. In fact she could not even remember what part of Calabar she had originally come from; it was Ma Palagada who had given her the Ibo name Amanna, meaning someone who did not know her own father. She had been born a twin among people who rejected twins, and though her mother had managed to nurse her secretly for a while, the time had come when it was impossible to keep her any longer, and the child was sold. Amanna did not know a word of her native Efik but chartered like a monkey in Ibo. (TSG 89)

Initially Ojebeta is too young to recognise that she is a slave. She is the youngest of all the slaves. There is no differentiation in the work allotted, whether they are young or old, the work is evenly split and all the slaves are expected to do it, if anyone have not

done the work then Pa Palagada, would give them punishments. They are expected to follow certain rules inside the household, if they are found disobeying the rules, then Pa Palagada beat them heavily with bamboo canes.

Ojebeta had been a prey many times to Pa Palagada's beatings. Another important factor to be observed at this point is that it is Ma Palagada, who is responsible for raising money through her trade in the market, but has no power to punish the slaves. It is Pa Palagada who has taken that rights and enjoys punishing the slaves and dictate rules in the family. The true patriarchal domination prevails in the household of Ma Palagada, the main work of Pa Palagada is to drink barrel of palm wine and enjoy his day by lingering at home, thinking different and new types of violent punishments by which he could torture the slaves. Though a lot of wealth was accumulated from the hard work of Ma Palagada, due to the laws prescribed by the patriarchal society all her wealth belonged to her lazy and passive husband. The dominance of Pa Palagada makes Ojebeta come to a conclusion:

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. It was a known fact that although Ma Palagada was the one who had bought them, they ultimately belonged to Pa Palagada, and whatever he said or ordered would hold. (TSG 112)

The novelist tries to emphasise the fact that Ibuza is a place well known for its patriarchal domination where there is no right or freedom for women. It doesn't matter if a woman is earning for her own livelihood or not, but she is always a woman with no

power. Quickly Ojebeta understands that she has to be submissive to the orders of her masters or owners who have bought them and started to be humble and unproblematic. “She, Ojebeta the only daughter of Umeadi, who had been encouraged to trust everybody, to say what she felt like saying, to shout when she felt like doing so, would start behaving like these girls who so reminded her of the wooden dolls in front of her 'chi' shrine at home in Ibuza.” (TSG 87)

The slave girls were provided with a common room in the Palagadas' household and it is the only place where the true colours of the slave girls would be revealed, their suppressive minds, longing desires and repressed thoughts are shared. The slave room provides a secured feeling to Ojebeta and an opportunity to be close with the senior slave girls. The senior girls secretly talk about the awkward activities of the male members of the family.

Ma Palagada is a strong and hard-working woman with a zealous sense of business knowledge. In spite of her hard-physical appearance she is a soft-hearted woman. She is ready to provide the slave girls with clothes and provides food for them. The nearby women slave owners knew very well that Ma Palagada's slave girls are more privileged than the slave girls of other homes. The slaves are oppressed and undergo countless anguish right from their sale as they are forced to do work in their rich houses and in their market stalls; they are also sexually exploited. This agony is a never-ending pain during their lifetime. Chiago, the innocent seventeen-year-old girl is sexually exploited by Pa Palagada and she gives birth to his child. She is unable to defend herself from being exploited; she says sadly that she has no choice for she is just a slave girl. In the male dominated society these unfortunate women have no right to safeguard themselves.

The Europeans who wanted to spread their religion in other countries encouraged the people to join in their mission schools. Initially the local people hesitated sending their children to those schools. So, the Europeans attracted the slaves and their masters towards them. They advertised that if the slave owners sent their slaves to their schools, then the slave owners will be provided with better economic prospects and jobs.

Mrs. Simpson, wife of the new United Africa Company Chief approached Ma Palagada and requested her to send some of her slaves to help her to run the local Church Missionary Society School. Ma Palagada readily accepted and sent her slaves to attend Missionary Society School. Accordingly, Ma Palagada was given approval to own more market stalls and she was also allowed to buy any imported goods at wholesale price well before her competitors came to know about it. Seeing that conversion to Christianity has made Ma very rich, smaller traders converted to Christianity. As a result church going became a daily routine to Palagada's family members.

The slave girls of Ma Palagada were perceived as privileged slaves because they are going to church and are also provided with Christian education and so they are no more illiterate pagans. The slave girls were allowed to go to these schools only if they completed their daily tasks. Attending school was a new experience for the slave girls, they quite enjoyed it. They had new outfits made for them in plain materials, outfits that did not have separate tops and lappas but were all joined together “- what Mrs. Simpson called a gown and the girls called ‘gan’ – “The girls were also made to wear some hats, tied on to their heads with cloth round the sides. In church they were taught that women's heads were holy and should be covered.” (TSG 103)

Soon Ojebeta along with her friends, "... learned to read in Ibo from a green book called Azu-Ndu, and what they found out from the printed word gave them endless amusement; they read and reread the stories, the sayings, until they knew most of the little book off by heart" (TSG 105). They were wonder struck by the preaching of Mrs. Simpson and her code of conduct. They readily accepted and adopted new morals and behavioural policy of the new religion and they consider it as a pride to learn the foreign language since English was highly esteemed. "Education is the crucial liberating force in the lives of Emecheta's heroines, and in fact their degree of servitude is inversely proportional to the amount of education they receive." (qtd. in Frank 481)

Ojebeta was one among the slave girls who was fortunate enough to learn the fundamental tutoring on some basic mathematical calculations, sewing dresses and also to bake cakes. The slave girls felt proud of their acquired knowledge without understanding the secret intention behind their master's acceptance of providing them with education. The master's thought that their financial benefit would get doubled by sending these girls to church as the slave girls learnt cooking which might help them to get better foodstuff in their household and also if the slave girls learnt to dress pleasantly they might certainly attract more customers to their shops. This is the innate plan of Ma Palagada.

Education provides them an opportunity to free themselves from the overpowering authority of tradition. Yet the possibility for much social change in the life of African women is less; they have to fight against the standard norms and regulations that are formed to oppress them. The slave girls are also approved to attend Sunday schools where they were taught to read their native language Ibo. The novelist firmly believes that the

education the slave girls obtain will definitely help them to understand the society and also change their attitude.

Subordination and powerlessness have made the slave girls to believe themselves as worthless, incapable human being. There is a change in the attitude of the slave girls after gaining education. There is quite a lot of transformation in the life of Ojebeta as she learns to read and write, her outfit is modelled according to the European style and her communication skill improved. She is so happy to attend Church on Sundays along with her fellow mates and is enthralled to learn the skill of making dresses of her own. Education provides a lot of constructive improvements in the life of the slave girls.

Whenever Ma Palagada shows special kindness to them like presenting them with Muslin cloth to stitch their dresses they thank Ma thus: “Thank you, Ma, for being so kind to us. May god make you prosper the more” (TSG 107). In case of some harsh treatment by Palagada’s family members they accepted it meekly. Ultimately, attending school has become a temporary relief to the slave girls from the tortures and pains that they face and also provided them a sense of belonging and regard themselves as special because this opportunity is not provided for all the slaves.

Ma Palagada’s only son Clifford came home after his studies, now Ojebeta has grown up to be a “strong, healthy and almost beautiful” girl (TSG 117), he was stunned by the beauty of Ojebeta, he likes to marry her, he expresses his desire in quite a demanding way. She was astonished and asked, “Me? ... But I am only your mother’s slave” (TSG 117), was Ojebeta’s reply to the assertion of Clifford. In reply to this Clifford said, “Have you never heard of masters marrying their female slaves, then?” (TSG 117). The intention of



Clifford exhibits owner's mindset; the slaves are not even allowed to decide their own life partner. In their culture slaves were used by masters as they like. Clifford, typically has the same mentality as that of his dad, Pa Palagada, who used his wife's slave Chiago, to fulfil his carnal desires. No doubt that Ojebeta and the other slaves of Ma Palagada's household were provided a better life than the slaves who belonged to the other rich people. It is clearly brought out in the conversation between Clifford and his mother, when he expressed his final decision to marry Ojebeta:

“But, so, this is serious, Ma was saying to Clifford. “Why did you not tell me long ago? I would have spent more on her upbringing—and, look, I paid for her.”

“Well, you can regard what you paid for her as her bride price. After all, you once told me that her brother had said you could give her away to whichever husband you wished when she grew up...”

“Yes, there can be no doubt about that. I bought her body and soul. I feel we should have given her some more sophisticated training.” (TSG 129)

In the above conversation, it is found that Ma Palagada feels that if she had known the wish of Clifford to marry Ojebeta earlier, she might have taken more care of her and would have provided her with more urbane training. While Clifford considers Ojebeta as his property, his mother has to take the decision. One could note that they both never cared about the mind and desire of Ojebeta, they just consider her as a mere object. He also adds that “... in these changing times an Igbo woman who could sew, cook and serve civilized food, even read and write her name, was going to be an asset for her husband. No, Ojebeta could not be considered an ordinary slave girl, particularly since they were related”

(TSG 115). He considers her as an ideal wife as she is educated and not because of the love or affection, thus his selfish motive is revealed. Ojebeta was not affected by the marriage proposal, as she was ready to adapt with the changes that happened in her life. She was silent to all the sufferings and injustices done to her and the other slaves. She remained grateful to Ma Palagada for she knew that Ma owned her.

Many unexpected and shocking incidents started happening in the household of Ma Palagada. Ma Palagada's health suddenly deteriorated and much change started to occur in the household, gloominess filled everywhere and there was no spirit or liveliness, after much prayers she regained her health, the whole household celebrated her, but their joy was short lived, she could not withstand for a long time, she died. The unexpected illness of Ma Palagada put an end to the talk of marriage between Clifford and Ojebeta because the total household was in a perplexed state. After Ma Palagada's death, her daughter Victoria wanted to take Ojebeta with her to her husband's house. Victoria wanted to take her because Ma Palagada had trained all of her slaves with the basic education and also had taught them trading and household chores. She knows very well that Ojebeta might be of great help to her in taking care of her children and would help her in the household.

Ojebeta raised her voice for the very first time and demanded her freedom to Pa Palagada. During the Ma's illness, Chiago had taken the role of little Ma of the house because she was carrying the child of Pa Palagada. Chiago recommended and convinced him to grant Ojebeta her freedom. Ojebeta was granted freedom by Pa Palagada. She goes to her home after many years as a young lady. Ojebeta was received warmly by her village

people especially by her father's sister Uteh. She stayed in Uteh's house. Ojebeta enquires about her wicked brother who sold her and who was responsible for her suffering.

Aunt Uteh represents the traditional Ibuza women who support and guide young women into the world of patriarchy. Uteh told her, "No woman is ever free. To be owned by a man is a great honor. So perhaps in a sense your brother was not too much in wrong" (TSG 158). She speaks on behalf of Okolie and supports him for his action. Okolie offence of selling his sister could not be regarded wrong because at that period of time his elder brother was not with them when their parents died, so he took up the role of the elder member of the family and had the right to sell his sister. He sold her as he was not in position to take care of her and he felt that she will be taken care of by Ma Palagada better than him. She says that his deed has not brought any bad to Ojebeta rather it has brought positive changes. Her words and deeds make Ojebeta becomes aware of the predicament that she has to remain a slave all her life. The words of Uteh prove that Ibuza women take great pride in being owned by a man.

When Ojebeta left Ma Palagada's house, her slave friends provided her share of money that they had saved secretly from their little earnings they get from their owners during special occasions. She started her trade with the help of the money she had earned when she was a slave. She has learnt to handle trading through Ma Palagada and in her church schooling. So with the help of the modest knowledge she possessed, she engaged herself in palm oil trade while living with her aunt. She does not like to depend on her aunt's family for her needs, moreover she strictly adheres to the ancient tradition of women involving themselves in some earning to take care of their family needs. She bought her some clothes and ribbons from the profit she made. She also gives some money to please

her aunt who admires her for the skills she possess. She follows the habit of visiting the nearby church every Sunday along with her native friends. Eze's cousin wishes to marry Ojebeta, so Eze decides to give Ojebeta in marriage to Adim according to his wish. When he comes to know that Ojebeta and Jacob are interested in each other, Eze fights with his wife Uteh who wishes to support Ojebeta's love.

Eze has taken that decision because; he and his wife were the only caretakers of Ojebeta since she didn't have anyone to take care of her. So Eze thinks that he has all the rights to give Ojebeta married to whomever he likes, he informs his wife if Ojebeta rejects to marry his cousin, then he would cut the hair of Ojebeta. Eze informs his wife Uteh, "Well, we all know what a man can do to a girl to make her his wife forever . . . What are you talking about? Cut a curl of Ojebeta's hair? You are wicked, Eze . . ." (TSG 167).

When she overhears the above conversation between her aunt and her husband she feels,

"... like her Ogbange charms, her hair seemed to symbolise her freedom. Would she ever be free? Must she be a slave all her life, never being allowed to do what she liked? Was it the fate of all Ibuza women or just her own? Still it would have been better to be a slave to a master of your choice, than to one who did not care or ever know who you were" (TSG 168) .

She wasn't willing to get herself entangled in any forced marriage. So she firmly decides,

She had been a slave before against her wishes; if this time she must marry and belong to a man according to the custom of her people, she intended doing so with

her eyes wide open ... She sneaked to where Eze kept his shaving knife and shaved off every last vestige of hair on her head, then went out to the back of the hut and burned all the pieces. (TSG 168)

Ojebeta shaves her head in order to escape from forced marriage. In their society there is a custom, which gives freedom to a boy to select his bride. If the boy cuts a lock of hair of the girl whom he desires then the innocent girl belongs to him, she should passively accept him.

This shows the brutal patriarchal society which is ready to go to any extent in order to make their wishes come true.

During her church visits, Ojebeta gets introduced to a Westernized, Christian named Jacob who was a hard working educated man. She was attracted by his humbleness and polite manners. At Ibuza, Ogbanje meets Jacob Okonji “an elite among his people since he could read and write” (TSG 162) . She thinks that, if this time she must marry and belong to a man according to the custom of her people, then she must do so with her eyes open. “It would be better to be a slave to a master of your choice, Jacob would be a better choice” (TSG 168).

Ojebeta is glad to learn that he too is interested in her and more pleased that he has acquaintance with her elder brother who has left their family long before her parent’s death. Jacob was a man of principles, he likes to go by tradition, so he meets Ojebeta’s elder brother, gets his affirmation. Thus Ojebeta decides to marry him, but her communal father, uncle Eze, disapproves of her decision. He was neglected since Ojebeta and Jacob love each other and they have got consent from her elder brother, who is her true guardian, they elope to Lagos and get married there. But it is an act of challenging the Ibuza tradition.

Ojebeta and Jacob happily start their new life. Eventhough she marries a man of her own choice, she has to accept the fact that she has become his property. She looks down upon the native Ibuza girls for their lack of knowledge and good manners. She considers her native culture as inferior. She is not in position to identify that clinging to this foreign culture is also yet another form of slavery. She agrees with aunt Uteh that to be owned by a man is a great honour. She is well aware of the subjugated status given to Igbo wives, but finally the circumstances make her into a submissive wife. "In her own way Ojebeta was content and did not want more of life; she was happy in her husband, happy to be submissive...because that was what she had been brought up to believe a wife should to expect" (TSG 173 - 174).

Ojebeta realized that no woman is ever free in Igbo, and is dependent on the male members of her home as it is the norm set up by the patriarchal society. The period of slavery she experienced in Ma Palagada's house was the period of preparation for her married life with Jacob. Ironically, after her marriage she starts believing that her role as wife and mother would provide a secure and joyful family. She loves to belong to Jacob in body and soul and she readily accepts it. "... she was satisfied to belong to a man like Jacob, a fellow townsman, one who would never call her a slave, and who gave her a real home, even if it was only one room that served for sitting, eating, sleeping and everything else. She would rather have this than be a slave in a big house in Onitsha" (TSG 176).

One does not ask whether they loved and cared for each other ever after; those words make no sense in a situation like this. There was certainly a kind eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced maybe by centuries of traditions, taboos and, latterly, Christian dogma. Slave, obey your master.

Wife, honour your husband, who is your father, your head, your heart, your soul. So there was little room for Ojebeta to exercise her own individuality, her own feelings, for these were entwined in Jacob's. She was lucky, however, that although Jacob proved to be quite a jealous man, he was above all a Christian. (TSG 173- 174)

Ojebeta is happily married with two children. In the traditional Ibuza there exists a belief that ill luck falls on the slaves and also they are not free until their money is returned to the owners. This myth stays alive amidst the Igbo people, when Ogbanje starts to have miscarriages after having two children, Jacob and her family consult the tibia, the native doctor and as per his advice, Clifford, the son of Ma Palagada was called and the money was refunded to him and her freedom regained.

Ojebeta was quick in learning a new art taught by missionaries and quick enough to adapt to the new environment. She was a vibrant and strong-willed young lady sparkling with energy when she left the house of Ma Palagada. Clifford expresses his bewilderment on seeing the drastic change in her: "Ojebeta had changed. She was thinner, much older than his imagination would have allowed. .... But the old Ojebeta- the energetic, laughing one - was gone forever" (TSG 176).

Ojebeta becomes a worn out middle-aged mother. The novel concludes with Jacob's formal purchase of his wife from Clifford, the son of her previous owner, Ma Palagada. Ojebeta is "too defeated, too cowed, to be fully aware of her abasement" (Frank 480). She kneels in front of her husband Jacob, and declares "Thank you my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master" (TSG 179). According to

Stratton, Ojebeta transforms "...from autonomy and self assertion into dependency and abnegation, from the freedom and fullness of girlhood into the slavery and self-denial of womanhood" (TSG 151).

Ojebeta gains confidence and courage through her education which affords her to be distinctive in her commune. She claims her freedom in choosing her life partner. She exhibits herself as a capable individual, independent in her thoughts. She gains her freedom from her owners, makes a right decision and selects her life partner, after all these success in her life, she turns back to her traditional beliefs and asks her husband to pay her bride price to set her free from the persons who owned her.

The traditional norms and regulations play a pivotal role in Ojebeta's life. The conventions that are followed in their community considers it right to sell their own children in case of a need; thus no woman is free, throughout her life she is controlled by men, probably her father, brother, husband or son. As Ojebeta is orphaned, her uncle Eze takes her to his home on the request of his wife Uteh. He says "After all, a girl needed men to guide her; her father or any man who could represent a father, or when she grew up a husband" (TSG 78). The words of Eze becomes true in the life of Ojebeta, she is at first directed by her father, after his death her younger brother Okolie sold her to a rich distant relative since he is not in position to take care of her and also his dire need of money made him to do such a evil deed. Then she was controlled by the Palagadas, her owners. When she gains her freedom from slavery, Eze, her uncle tries to dominate her. Finally, when she was married to Jacob, she had to follow his orders and wishes. Thus a woman has no freedom; whether she is at her parent's house or husband's house; it is always going to be her owner's house.



Ojebeta could not overcome the traditional practices prescribed by the society, her education, experience in trading; her rebellious victory from slavery, none of these things helped her from the oppression set by her culture. The last note provided in the novel implies the inherent preference of women to accept the principles of patriarchal culture. She accepts her victimization. She says, “The contract is completed, after all these years. I feel free in belonging to a new master from my very own town Ibuza; my mind is now at rest... Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master.” (TSG 178-179). The words that she used such as “free”, “master”, “owner” emphasizes that though she is free from the slavery of Palagada’s family she is bonded to her husband, who is her new master. Lloyd Brown comments on women like Ojebeta as, “Women like Ojebeta are their own worst enemies” (25).

Ojebeta is a literate person, who can handle a small trading of her own. She is esteemed by her friends for her capacity to read and write. In spite of her education she turns to traditional belief and pays bride price to ascertain her freedom. She becomes a submissive wife, and surrenders herself in the hands of her husband. “In Ibuza women were usually more conservative than men” (TSG 150). The novel clearly states that the women in patriarchal society are viewed as subalterns and voiceless because women are not given any space or identity to prove their capacity. The forces of patriarchal power subdue the talents of intellectual rational thinking women. The images of women were depicted in ancient culture as submissive sufferers, always remaining silent in performing their roles as daughters, wives, mothers and as grandmothers. “Her position is certainly that of a docile and dependent figure . . .” (Robbins 52).

Ojebeta surrendering to her husband suggests that however the women may be educated; they are not able to free themselves from their traditional values. John Stuart Mill in his essay “The Subjection of Women” says,

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (1)

The novel insists that the institution of marriage is also like the relationship between the master and the slave, if you would like to retain a happy relationship till the end you have to remain submissive. Just like a slave who obey his master and is depend on him for everything, the wife should also obey and follow her husband’s words if she wants to lead a happy life, so finally Ojebeta wants to be happy in her life and chooses the life of slavery for the rest of her life.

The novelist expresses that while the whole world was changing rapidly, the Ibo land remained unchanged and was immersed in traditional beliefs. “So as Britain was emerging from war once more victorious, and claiming to have stopped the slavery which she had helped to spread in all her black colonies, Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five was changing masters” (TSG 179). It is a clear indication that Ojebeata has just changed her master, but has not set herself free from the slavery. She was now owned by a new master.

Motherhood is always patronised in the novels of Emecheta. Umehadi, the mother of Ojebeta was purely a figure of love, who adores her family, takes care of her husband

and is ready to sacrifice her life for the sake of her girl child. She dies soon after the death of her husband leaving her loving daughter orphaned. She is a traditional woman who strictly abides by the norms set by the society.

The second motherly figure in the novel is Ma Palagada. When she meets Ojebeta for the first time, instinct of motherly affection innate in her makes her feel regretful for the unfortunate young girl. She calls Ojebeta affectionately, "I only want to greet you. You haven't said a single word to me. Come. I am your relative, you know. Come. You mustn't be frightened of us. We are not bad people. Just come" (TSG 53). The words are not just from her lips, it is from her heart. She feels apologetic by looking at the scared little Ojebeta who is frightened, terrified and alarmed at the new faces.

M'a Palagada, although she bought slaves whom she expected to work hard to help her with her trade and with the running of her vast household, was not as strict a mistress as others, and even seemed to try as much as possible to treat her girl slaves as her own daughters - "as much as possible", because no well brought up lady in her situation would, for example, dream of allowing her bought girls to sleep in the same building as the daughters of "human beings": there were special parts of the compound allocated to them. (TSG 89)

Ma Palagada could not be considered as a flawless character. When her husband Pa Palagada sexually harasses her slave girls, she is not able to protect them; she simply goes unheeded to those complaints. She is the sole member who earns for the whole household, all her power is only outside the house. Ma is expected to obey the words of Pa Palagada. Ma Palagada is also a victim of patriarchy. Ma Palagada is considered as an

efficient mother and fulfils the expectations of the society by remaining as an individual contributor for her house, facing emotional and monetary difficulties solely. She treats her slaves well and ensures that they are well cared for in return for their manual work and trustworthiness.

The girls were busier than ever as the first church harvest approached. Many of the successful people who had made a great deal of money from selling palm kernels instead of slaves were converted to some form of Christianity, which meant that they all wanted to wear some new outfit for the harvest festival. The girls were encouraged to work even harder by the expectation that they too would have something new to wear, for they knew that Ma Palagada liked to plan little surprises even for her lowliest servant. (TSG 105)

Ma Palagada is a symbol of traditional mother. When Ma falls sick due to sudden illness the whole household collapses. The slaves felt as if they are really orphaned now, and doubted who will be there for them to take care of them in future like Ma.

Emecheta's novels describe a variety of women belonging to different generations. Women in Nigeria were doubly oppressed due to patriarchy and colonialism. Colonialism did not affect the male gender much, because the colonizers celebrated male-oriented values. Okolie defends himself for his action by saying that, "Even if she was an only daughter, she was still only a daughter" (TSG 80).

Initially the upper class natives are given privilege and they are made to consider themselves as masters, but the real power was with the colonizers. The upper class natives believed that the power was with them and marginalized the poor and subjugated people around them. When the marginalized raise their voices against the upper class the colonial

power comes to their rescue. The master's of Ojebeta were controlled by European powers. Ma Palagada, whether she wishes or not she has to send her slaves to missionary schools. Pa Palagada considers the slaves as marginalised and oppresses them by his power, unknowing that he and his wife were considered to be marginalised by the colonisers.

African women face multiple oppressions in their life. So women writers who take it up as their duty to throw light on the suffering of their black women have highlighted the multiple oppressions faced by their fellow human beings in their writing.

African women writers vocalize their simultaneous experience of multiple oppressions as...gender is (only) one issue out of many. Consequently, an African feminist theory cannot only deal with the 'male-female'-problem because abolishing one of the oppressions will not solve the problems facing African women.

Achieving equality between African men and women will still leave the problems of neo-colonialism, racism and imperialism. (Edith 25)

From time immemorial women were expected to serve their husband, bear children and to take care of the children. Men dictated and they decided the life women had to lead. It is the real status of women from the past to the present situation. Thus the patriarchal society keeps women subjugated always. "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" (TSG 112).