2. Women in Society – A Radical Approach to the Novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta

2.1 Feminist Literary Theories – An Introduction

The word feminism came into English from the French “feminisme” which was first used in the 1880s by an advocate of women's political rights Hubertine Auclert. She was the founder of the first Woman Suffrage society in France. Among the various definitions, the one given below embodies more or less the whole sense of this ideology:

Feminism is a complete social revolution: freedom for all forms of women’s active expression, elimination of all structural and psychological handicaps to women’s economic independence, an end to the double standard of sexual morality, release from Constraining sexual stereotypes and opportunity to shine in every civic professional capacity. (Hause 1987:15)

Though political turning-points occurred in the twentieth century, this ideology of feminism originated from earlier periods. It took its principles from various sources. The latter part of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century witnessed progress in all fields, particularly in literature and the period is known as the Enlightenment. A literary movement, especially developed during this period, Rationalism, would nourish the feminist theories later with ideas about natural equal rights and liberties for all human beings. In addition, feminist theorists were encouraged by Protestantism which, in the religious field,
in the nineteenth century, claimed the moral superiority of women. On the basis of such an assertion, they valued womanhood. Finally political ideologies, grounding their critiques of inequity in the capitalist societies on socialist ideology, provided feminists with another argument. Indeed they reproached the capitalist system with its competitive and individualist principles, which were for women basically oppressive. In fact, Mary Wollstonecraft and later on, Simone De Beauvoir defended women's rights in claiming that sex hierarchy was social but not natural. They aimed at raising feminist consciousness. Consequently, such assertions resulted in the rise of various feminist literary theories.

The French feminists, for instance, have looked at the ways that the feminine has been defined, represented, or repressed in the symbolic system of language, metaphysics, psychoanalysis, and art. Indeed, feminists have first concentrated on denouncing misogyny classic and popular male literature: stereotyped images of women in texts. Then, they have uncovered a female aesthetics in the literary field which has totally been left out by patriarchal norms. Finally, women have not only required the recognition of their writing but also a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study, a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing based on male literary experience.

Radical French feminist theorists have urged female writers to identify with whatever is devalued in society by cultural norms. On the whole, feminism has been a social awakening of the women of the entire world. The social, cultural, economic, ideological and political differences of the various scholars give rise to some antagonisms. Black feminist theory has its sources in two movements: the Black male and white female liberation thoughts. It really blossomed in the nineteen sixties. Black feminists analyze that historically we have not been full participants in white feminist organizations. Even today African-American,
Hispanic, Native American, and Asian-American women criticize the feminist movement and its scholarship for being racist and overly concerned with white, middle-class women’s issues. Indeed, black feminists have found white feminist theories reflecting white hegemony. As far as white women belong to the privileged class, their claims cannot meet that of the lower class and, as Whites, they ignore race oppression. In fact, distinguishing features of black feminist theorists are shaped by Black women's experiences with both racial and gender oppression that result in needs and problems distinct from White women’s as well as Black men’s, and Black women must struggle for equality both as women and as African-Americans. Hence, resulting from such racist, social, economic and political exclusion, black intellectuals have elaborated theories totally fitted to their needs and claims.

One of them, by the black writer Alice Walker embodies for many black scholars the essence of black womanhood. Womanism is, as she characterizes it, to feminism as purple to lavender. Feminist theory is not one, but many theories or perspectives and that each perspective attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation. Nevertheless, African-American females have formulated a theory suitable to their realities. And black female intellectuals have been central to black feminism because their experiences as Blacks and women have provided them an authentic standpoint on black womanhood, peculiar to them, and complex to understand for white female and black male scholars.

For Alice Walker, "womanist" connotes a notion of color and she is a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture and women’s strength. Sometimes, she loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually, and committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people. Thus, a womanist may have platonic or sexual relations with
other women, nevertheless, she is not fundamentally "separatist". Her interests concern the whole community, women as well as men included, but she is first and foremost a woman. Furthermore, other scholars go beyond, assessing that black feminism is not restrictive. A strengthened and unified family is the first orientation of womanism, and that is particularly recurrent of some great African qualities. Womanism bears some resemblance to a few theories about women’s liberation, but it has very distinct characteristics emerging from African values. African women in the diasporas are retrieving these values in spite of time and regional mediation. Nevertheless, black women have understood that white feminist literary theories owe their radicalism to the western context. But a meeting point is that African women, like all women, need liberation. To argue against that is an illusion resulting from over-romanticism. But many African women writers refuse the western ideological philosophy.

Surprisingly enough, Buchi Emecheta has suffered a lot from marriage. She has been given to the most generous suitor whose family has invested in her because as a literate woman, she produces an income. Determined to escape the yoke of her husband's family, she goes to join him in Great Britain. But once there, before knowing what happened, she finds herself with five children in her early twenties. It would be easier to live with the help of her husband, Francis, but lazy as he is, she is the main supporter of the family. She has to nourish, take care of her children's health with her own money, and at the same time pay for Francis's studies. She both suffers from sexist and racist oppression.

Thus, Emecheta's defense of an institution such as marriage, after all that she has endured, is praiseworthy but not surprising enough, merely because she has conserved her basic African values. Actually this is the main principle of womanism. Womanism does not require compartmentalization, and one does not need to identify radical, liberal, psycho-analytic and other such characteristics of
womanism. Any African woman, who has the consciousness to situate the struggle within the African cultural realities by working for a total and robust self-retrieval of the African woman, is an African or Africana womanist. Historically and traditionally, men and women in Africa were not, and have never been, granted equal status. This has caused the African woman to play an unedifying subordinate role and to also accept that it was her place to do so. The African male novelist when he started to write portrayed this image of the woman well. In his novels, the African male novelist concurred with the traditional given role of the African woman as an obedient, silent, unquestioning domestic hand. But, the coming of the African female novelist on the literary scene has brought a whole new dimension to the issue of the role and position of the woman in Africa. The African female novelist has realized that if the woman must be known, heard and understood, she would have to speak for herself.

The woman we are shown by African female writers is the one that is oppressed, trodden, degraded, exploited and subjugated. Buchi Emecheta in her novel *The Slave Girl* explores the theme of the subjugation of the woman in a profound way. We find in this novel a successful work of art where language, symbolism and plot are beautifully interwoven to produce an apt exposition of the subjugation of the woman by man and society. A woman’s experiences encompass all that is human. A woman shares and has always shared the world equally with man. In this sense, half of the world’s experiences, half of the world’s work and many of its products have been hers. Being a part of the world and having a hand, shaping it, it is no wonder that what the world has seen and interpreted about the woman has been shaped for it through a value system defined by man.

A woman’s history has been a special kind; distorted and alienated because it has been refracted through the lens of a man’s record and observation. The African woman occupies a unique but unenviable position in the world. She has
borne the weight of inferior status and prejudice derived from her sex as well as her colour. But prejudice and physical oppression are not the heaviest burdens the African woman has had to bear. Her role as a wife and mother was, and still has been grotesquely distorted by the pressure of tradition and culture, and this has been the heaviest burden. The woman has played different roles in African life and society and these roles have sometimes been varied and also contradictory.

Firstly, the African woman has had to bear or endure physical labor and toil as a girl and later on as a breadwinner. She has had to become a play thing, an illicit pleasure for man. Yet, she has also remained a protector and provider for her family, a cushion for her man and children against the hostility and violence of the outside world. She has in recent times become involved deeply in a fight for equal rights with man. She has in this sense gone into an agonizing process or re-evaluating and re-defining herself on her own terms. The process through which the woman is re-evaluating and re-defining herself is said to be agonizing in the sense that in Africa, the advent of the woman into an exclusively male dominated world has not been easy. The African male has been hostile, envious and to an extent, has hated the new African woman. The woman on her part has had to deal with the fear of ostracism. This has caused the African woman not to mature or develop fully.

Cultural taboos and restrictions in African societies have subjected the African woman to exploitation, oppression and subjugation in the hands of man. Mazrui in his essay *The Black Woman and the Problem of Gender*, discuss sexism in three broad categories namely: benevolent, benign and malignant. Of all these three levels of sexism, Mazrui makes the point that malignant sexism is the most pervasive and most insidious as it subjects women to economic manipulation, sexual exploitation and political marginalization. In most African societies, the culture theory distinguishes between the role, activities, tastes and behaviors
prescribed and considered appropriate for women. Thus, women are destined to carry foo-foo and soup to men dealing with important matters. This is the very definition of subjugation. However, it is the height of folly for society to assume that these roles are God-ordained, unchangeable and final. The history of the African female has been linked to the vast project of colonialism, as the sex and gender role conflicts in post-colonial Africa, partly as a result of social structures that arose during the colonial period. African political economies were tied to the West, and African men were given increased recognition in political and commercial circles relative to women. After colonization, hierarchical gender roles and discriminatory relationships in politics, economics, religion and culture have tended to be continual. African women’s struggle against gender asymmetry and inequality is often described in terms of the relationship between public and private spheres, or the domestic versus public distinction in gender roles. In colonial Africa, female subordination took intricate forms grounded in traditional culture and implemented through this domestic-public dichotomy.

In many historical African societies, male-female roles were peculiar to the original social patterns and ideologies of those societies, but these became reconfigured around the edges as the society changed and evolved. The imposition of Western capitalism and political hegemonies altered the dynamics of gender and sexuality in many colonized societies with the result that the historical and contemporary dynamics of the African state, and its approach to gender issues, have been different at different times. Feminist research has disproved the pervasive stereotype that African gender roles are mired in an archaic past, and demonstrated that these roles have changed as culture is reshaped by experience and development.

Analyzing the identities of African males and females before colonization does not deny the underlying issues of sex and gender in reproduction, marriage,
family and other rites of passage, concerns and responsibilities. Rather, feminist analyses focus on understanding how these biological differences were used or ignored in traditional African social structures and relationships. African feminists tend to accept symbolic gender distinctions and identities that incorporate naturist assumptions about femaleness and maleness, but nevertheless challenge the subordination of women as an accompanying feature of these cultural constructs. The present concern is how women negotiate and manipulate gender relationships and meanings to meet their needs and interests at the local, national and global levels. Western feminists are often troubled that African women take their reproductive roles too seriously, celebrate their ability to give birth, and refuse to subordinate their biological roles to other roles within society. This pro-natal aspect of African culture is reflected in the fact that in many parts of the continent, African women still bear five or more children while being economically active. The alternative nature-culture ingredient in African feminism is not likely to disappear in the near future, although its manifestation may continue to weaken. Consequently, one must always consider the pro-natal element when one examines contemporary African feminism and its interaction with the state.

Before colonization, women’s contribution to the economies in their societies demonstrated how the household and political societies were linked through their activities and contributions. Economic and political relationships were corporate, not individual, and women conceived of their roles as determined by their membership in corporate groups that included the family, society and nation. This fusion of society, culture and community structured the roles that African women played in private, social, political and economic arenas. The early ideological model acknowledged that individuals were part of many interdependent human relations including family and community.
2.2 Historical Perspective on Feminism in Post-colonial Africa

The feminist movement that has emerged in post-colonial Africa is basically heterosexual, prenatal and concerned with women’s rights, political and economic issues. It differs radically from the Western model which is, by and large, an advocacy of sexual rights, female control over reproduction, choices within human sexuality and essentialism. Discourses on sexuality and feminism in the sub-Saharan African region are political projects that reflect specific class, cultural and religious interests, and are based on a human rights strategy. Identifying gender sex roles and identities in Africa has grown out of insights into post-colonial societies where the social and ideological structures of communities, and relationships in the public and private domains, remain essentially polyandrous. African women are active participants in these relationships in multi-dimensional roles, with responsibilities in the private and public domains remaining considerably gender specific.

Emerging feminist actions in the region are directed at bringing existing socio-cultural ideas of gender into the open, challenging them and defending suggestions for acceptable alternative forms and resolutions. There is also a greater boldness in addressing the economic and political elements that determine social constructions of gender roles and women’s status in African societies. The challenge to develop new views of gender equalities in regions that have always had distinct cultural traditions and historical experiences continues to pose difficulties. Throughout the region, the argument that African women should be accorded greater access to resources and control over their sexual lives, and the emerging views that male and female roles are parallel and complementary and should extend across household, economic, political and religious circles remain novel and theoretical in many respects.
The frequent conflicts between traditional/cultural, state/political and gender/sex interests are some of the special challenges encountered in the continent. African women’s unique and universal roles in rituals of birth, marriage, death and other rites of passage, and the strong association of women with reproductive and household activities, propagated by the male oriented colonial era has continued into the post-colonial moment. Feminist knowledge systems emerged out of the necessity of addressing African womanhood as the subject in the context of these pressures. A new inquiry into the meaning, nature, modalities, possibilities and desirability of an African feminist epistemology has become unavoidable in the competition with Western theories. The challenges, problems and prospects of the movement in third world feminist discourses are unique. The relations between religion and gender equality continues to be a multicultural headache as religious freedoms and women’s human rights remain burning issues in African societies.

Over the past three decades, many states in post-colonial Africa have survived several crises; the onset of coups and the establishments of democratic regimes, economic instabilities culminating in the collapse of national economies, the imposition of controversial Western styled Structural Adjustment Program, and the external pressure to democratize government processes so as to involve the people. From the onset, the pressure to democratize and open up public participation to women, as well as protect their rights, has been externally derived. This has produced female responses that have grown out of a mixture of indigenous African experiences and colonial interventions. Women started to challenge existing stereotypes, as well as verbalize and demonstrate their visions of gender roles in the continent on their own terms.

The African feminist approach differs structurally from the Western forms principally because African and much third world feminism owes its origins to
different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism. African women’s resistance to Western hegemony and its foreign legacy within African culture have also shaped the post-colonial movement. The African discourse has not grown out of the individualism within capitalist industrializing societies that brought about the women’s rights are human rights agenda and shaped the movements in the United States, Britain and other European countries. The new African feminism is not essentially characteristic of the feminist debates in Western countries about the female body, sexuality, autonomies and sexual rights. Rather, the emerging African model is distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal and concerned with economic, social, cultural and political empowerment. To this extent, it parallels the recent growth of feminism in other developing and non-Western countries.

The African variant of feminism has grown out of a history of female integration within largely masculine and agrarian-based societies with strong cultural heritages. These differences in the development of feminisms have caused frictions in certain ways between Western and African forms, particularly over sensitive issues like sexuality, abortion, early marriage and other customary practices that are culturally accepted in many non-Western societies. The newly emerging African feminism has also been as a result of women’s responses to political leaders who have attempted to limit political participation by women. This resistance has pushed women towards greater boldness in addressing the economic, legal and political elements that determine and affect gender and status in societies that have distinct cultural traditions and historical experiences. What has changed in the contemporary context is that the tradition, while continuing to be a source of cultural consensus, is now being openly questioned and reinterpreted.

However, the insistence of fundamental rights in liberal feminist ideologies currently being propagated by many Western theories is often inapplicable to a
third world or African situation. The reality is that tensions between the political state and certain rights continue in many third world countries. To be sure, feminists all over the world have broadened the parameters of debate and transformed the agenda to women’s rights, gender equality and equity. But it can hardly be claimed by African feminists that they have succeeded in gaining acceptance for the new interpretations and dimensions of sexualities and sexual rights. Nevertheless, there are significant developments in post-colonial feminism, even though many African societies have not fully become part of the contemporary discourse on civil society and possible constructions of gender and sexuality. If African women of the twentieth century should stop and think when the “rain started beating us” quoting Chinua Achebe’s popularized proverb, it will be when the men galloped away, enveloped as they were in the colonialists’ new culture of religion, education and money driven economy. The women were left behind to mind the homes, the children and the farms. Their erstwhile dependence on the men deepened as their consumerist status got elevated. The men had all the money and the power.

We blame colonialism as a whipping horse, but it is colonialism that eventually offered the beacon of light of women’s western education and exposure which propelled us to the outer wider world, and the recognition of the commonality of women’s subjugation worldwide. The term “feminism” is English, as the language itself, but its realization is inextricably bound to the culture and peculiar backgrounds and experiences of the women. It thus becomes worthwhile at this point to show the coping strategies of some women in cultures in Africa to maintain some measure of autonomy in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. This is an important prelude to women’s emancipation and quest for rights and status today.
When Flora Nwapa started writing in 1966, she was the first published Nigerian and African female writer. Her writing interest was women, and her motive for writing was to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels. She started from the grass-roots, and situated her women characters in the village environment with its masculine supremacy and dominance, where gender roles and relationships were strictly circumscribed by norms and tradition. Her first two novels *Efuru* and *Idu* featured village women who though unlettered, were accomplished and distinguished in their societies. Efuru was imbued with beauty, intelligence, industry and economic power. She was successful in life but not fecund. Her feminism shines forth when she was able to marry her first husband without the requisite dowry. She is able to live down the shame and abasement of two failed marriages, and exercises her right of choice, of staying married or returning to her father’s house. She was still admired and respected at the end of the novel. Idu, the protagonist in the eponymous novel shattered convention by choosing death rather than succumb to a levirate marriage at the demise of her husband. In Nwapa’s *One is Enough* she continued with the exploration of the woman’s options in the face of subjugation and victimization in marriage. She highlighted further, the paramount issue of childlessness in marriage. Amaka, after six years of marriage without children, fled from her marital home and her adulterous husband who had fathered two sons with another woman unknown to Amaka. Her city refuge opened up vistas in self-fulfillment due to her guts, industry and tenacity. In the permissive environment of the city, she became the mother of twin sons.

Buchi Emecheta in her novel *The Joys of Motherhood* presents to us the character of Adaku who in her marriage to two brothers had two daughters. Her position in the polyandrous home was not assured because she had no son as her co-wife Nnu ego. She walked out of her marriage into prostitution to make money
to ensure the future of her daughters. Nwapa’s subsequent novel *Women are Different* broke societal norms in order for her women to assert themselves.

The significant point here is that the women were successful in their dissent and were acclaimed by the society and their erstwhile husbands. They were not condemned nor ostracized. They were rather accorded recognition and respect. The immoral aspect of this early form of the women’s dissent will prove problematic as emulating strategies for up-coming generations. The three female protagonists had their fair share of male disappointments in love and marriage, but they did not disregard the marriage institution or the responsibility of motherhood. But their children became extremely iconoclastic and they even internationalized their escapades. The authorial intrusion shows Nwapa’s point of view, when Chinwe the daughter of Dora, one of the three protagonists suddenly divorced her husband of dwindling means, and concentrated on her contract business. Nwapa quipped that Chinwe had done the right thing. Her generation was doing better than her mother’s own. Her generation was telling the men, that there are different ways of living one’s life fully and fruitfully. They were saying that women, have options. Their lives cannot be ruined because of a bad marriage. They have a choice, a choice to marry and have children, a choice to marry or divorce their husbands; and Marriage is not the only way to live a fulfilling life.

What Nwapa and Emecheta are advocating for is personhood. By urging women to break out of subsuming norms and situations as the marriage institution, they stand the enormous risk of being dubbed cultural deviationists. For the marriage institution is sacred to culture, tradition and religion. But the truth of the matter is that a dreaded disease needs a correspondingly drastic cure. The ways our women writers liberated their women characters from the gendered yoke was to make them burst the system and be free. By the time the shock waves subside, the lesson would have been learnt.
The last point worth emphasizing in the women’s quest for rights is the importance of education for women. Education imparts knowledge, discernment, exposure and self-esteem. Agnes, one of the three main characters in Nwapa’s *Women are Different* was married off by the connivance of her stepmother after her high school, to an Onitsha trader. She studied at home and later attended a university. It was her graduate certificate that enabled her to fend for herself after her split with her husband and later the demise of her mentor. Agnes’ life had impacted others. Her friend, Dora, not as educated as Agnes, was abandoned by her husband Chris. She ruminated that she had a duty, and that duty was to her children. No matter what happened, she must give her children a good education. They should not be like her, but they must go to the university like Agnes. Education is a mighty step forward for women in the various nations of Africa today, and the reality on the ground is that girls are encouraged to read by their parents; and then they can have various governments’ and agency’s sponsorship. There are also Adult Literacy Programs. Illiteracy is still high among older women, and this poses a problem for writers reaching them through books. This non-accommodation of illiterate women in their large numbers was what Micere Mugo forcefully called “book apartheid”. The basic blame lies squarely on the oppressive economic conditions, and the socio-political environments that they live under and which we must seek to destroy.

Women’s rights have always been taken for granted, nicely and safely tucked away under the shelter of patriarchy. Silence was the virtue of women and passivity their glory, but it was not always so. Traditional societies in pre-colonial times had spheres of power and influence for women in closely knit organizations that helped them maintain a voice. Colonialism has its merits but its new culture of ascendancy through education, white-collar jobs and money-driven economy relegated women down the ladder in Africa with women’s education, brought exposure and awareness and the inevitable reaction. Feminism is a reaction; it is
an assertion of being, rights and status. Literature has proved a worthy tool in the investigation of women’s condition. The silence was broken by women writers in the mid-sixties in the continent which correspondingly was the era of political independence of quite a number of African States. The decade that followed, witnessed shades of feminist writing by African women and has advanced the women’s cause of recognition and relevance.

2.3 Women’s Role in Bessie Head’s When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru

Bessie Head is a crusader for sexual and social justice for all men and women. Her favorite theme is the drama of interpersonal relationships, and their possibility for individual growth and regeneration. She explores not only social harmony, but also what is unique in each individual who contributes to it. In the realization of this task she employs an imaginative power and an original grasp of style which match her forceful moral vision. In all this, the woman's identity is fundamental, for it is still easy to encapsulate the central issues of all Head's novels into the vital issues of power and identity. She truly approaches her characters as individuals, and with her usual sensitivity and thoroughness, journeys through the innermost recesses of their lives. The product of this exploration is the emergence of that uniqueness which makes each of them special.

To Bessie Head, South Africa typifies power in its ugliest form, and the revulsion with which she views such a moral wasteland has aroused in her a special reverence for human life and dignity. Head's characters are refugees, exiles, victims, all of whom are involved in a personal and very private odyssey of the soul from which they finally emerge regenerated, as well as spiritually and
psychologically enriched. Through them she explores the limitations of women's roles, their disadvantages, and their bruised self-image while celebrating their occasional successes. Head saw herself as the paradigm of the African woman struggling against entrenched social and sexual prejudices. As an exile in Botswana she has come to know the realities of alienation, racial prejudice, rejection, and victimization.

Her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* deals with the search for roots from different perspectives and as it affects characters of different social backgrounds, with different personal problems. In this first novel three women emerge. They bring along the usual characteristics of Bessie Head's women, who normally fall into a pattern of social abuse, emotional trauma, suffering, and finally growth in wisdom, peace, and partial happiness. Although a very important theme in this novel is Makhaya's search for peace and stability within a harmonious social order, his destiny is tightly controlled and eventually resolved by his association with the old woman, Mma Millipede and his future wife, Paulina Sebeso. Mma Millipede has been a victim of the crude and brutal power that Head criticizes in all her novels. She was initially forced into an unwanted marriage with a chief's son, Ramogodi, whom the author describes as "a drunkard and dissipated boaster" (Head 1968:68). Eventually she is divorced by the same Ramogodi, who soon falls in love with his younger brother's new wife and marries her after the offended brother hangs himself. It is part of Head's moral idealism that Mma Millepede and old Dinorego, whom she was initially prevented from marrying, should finally come together as friendly neighbors.

Through her own resourcefulness she soon settles down to a new life in Golema Mmidi. Her early exposure to some amount of missionary education has also had an impact on her personality: "Perhaps Mma-Millipede was one of those rare individuals with a distinct personality at birth. In any event, she was able to
grasp the religion of the missionaries and use its message to adorn and enrich her
own originality of thought and expand the natural kindness of her heart’’ (Head
1968:68). Mma Millipede emerges from her harrowing experience wiser and more
generous. Her kindness and concern for everybody soon make her the mother of
all. She watches, counsels the young, and participates in their problems. The
young man, Makhaya, is the greatest beneficiary of the old woman's wisdom and
love. He has come as a drowning man to a strange community searching for a few
simple answers on how to live well and sanely.

From the old woman Makhaya also learns that generosity of mind and soul
is real because the old woman sustains that precious quality at a pitch too intense
for him to endure. Their long conversations yield more fruit than the old woman
herself ever expected. Mma Millepede therefore broods over the world of this
novel like a guardian spirit, yet operates with the familiar human tools of
observation, understanding, kindness, and generosity. Paulina Sebeso is the other
woman who stands out in Golema Mmidi, first on her own merit and personality,
and ultimately as the wife of Makhaya. Sebeso, like Mma Millepede, had an
unsuccessful marriage with a Rhodesian man who killed himself to prove his
innocence in a story of official scandal and embezzlement. In the process, she lost
a home and all her property, and came to Golema Mmidi with her two children.

The motifs of victimization, injustice, and suffering are present in the life of
this impetuous and passionate young woman, who is also steadied by Mma
Millipede, and protected from falling into emotional instability. Sebeso has
learned lessons from her fate, and comes to Golema Mmidi toughened and
determined to start a new life. From the start the author sets her apart from the
other women around her, for although, according to Head, "she was born into their
kind of world and fed on the same diet of thin maize porridge by a meek,
repressed, dull-eyed mother" (Head 1968:94), even as a child she was very
inquisitive and meddlesome. Her athletic ability assured her more education than other women. Even her gait was decisive, and betrayed a sense of direction.

It was all this that really distinguished her from the rest of the women, even though her circumstances and upbringing were no different from theirs. She had travelled a longer way, too, on the road of life. Sebeso’s gift in organization is amply demonstrated in her role at the co-operative. Even the old woman, Mma Millepede, admits that Paulina is the only woman who can persuade the other women to attend lessons at the farm. Naturally, most of the men find her too bossy. Her courage and strength of character also stand out in her quiet acceptance of the death by tuberculosis of her son, Isaac. The final union of this impetuous woman with the reserved Makhaya marks the end of the refugee's morbid speculations on the oppressors and the oppressed and his journey towards self-discovery, peace, and happiness.

Dinorego's daughter, Maria, is the third significant female character in this novel. Reserved, clever, and unpredictable, she forms a perfect match to the simple and uncomplicated Gilbert, the practical man and the originator of the little agricultural miracle which is one of the interesting phenomena of this novel. She is soft-spoken and meditative, but at the same time full of ruthless common sense. For a long time Maria has quietly served her father, and after three years she agrees to marry Gilbert whose strange ways she reveals to Mma Millepede when she goes to seek her advice. In her relationship with her husband she remains the dominant personality, quiet but retaining a mind of her own.

Through these women Bessie Head presents us with her ideal; they are all tough, resolute, and are endowed with shrewd common sense. Their relationship with men is on an equal footing. They stand out from the generality of Botswana women, whom Head criticizes for acquiescing in their oppression, for remaining
their same old "tribal selves, docile and inferior" (Head 1968:68), despite their exposure to the opportunity of missionary education. Head laments such a wasted opportunity by women who are naturally disposed to hard work. Nevertheless, her final picture of them remains admirable:

\[\text{It was always like this. Any little thing was an adventure. They were capable of pitching themselves into the hardest, most sustained labor with perhaps the same joy that society women in other parts of the world experience when they organize fetes or tea parties. No men ever worked harder than Botswana women, for the whole burden of providing food for big families rested with them. It was their sticks that thrashed the corn at harvesting time and their winnowing baskets that filled the air for miles and miles around with the dust of husks, and they often, in addition to broadcasting the seed when the early rains fell, took over the tasks of the men and also ploughed the land with oxen". (Head 1968: 104)}\]

In *Maru*, Head becomes more autobiographical but manages with enough artistic distance to make the history of Margaret Cadmore, named after her British foster mother, a representative one. It portrays the intense racial prejudice and tribal politics which inform life in a Botswana village, and under which women too often become victims. The background story is that of Margaret Cadmore, a Masarwa who arrives in the village of Dilepe and becomes the centre of a controversy, not just in the school, but between two friends, both members of the royalty and both in love with her. Insults from children and adults alike fail to
discomfit the heroine, since from childhood she has come to live with a feeling of being permanently unwanted by society. Eventually, the situation is resolved into her marriage to Maru rather than Moleka, whom she loves. She is therefore a passive agent in this drama of power. However, she never stops loving Moleka, to the eternal chagrin of her husband Maru.

Head invests Margaret with an air of mystery which complements Maru's mysterious personality. In addition, Margaret possesses a mine of inner strength and individuality which is her legacy from her British foster-mother. She represents Head's ideal woman, and in her retention of her love for Moleka even after her marriage to Maru, she symbolizes Head's ideal woman confronting the issue of male protectiveness and possession on one hand, and crude male power on the other. In other words, she is Maru’s equal and, as an artist, dreams Maru’s dreams, as Maru discovers later to both his dismay and joy. This issue is not resolved in the novel. Suffice to say that Maru's idyllic married life with Margaret is permanently tainted by a dark boiling cloud, typified by moments of brooding jealousy and malicious meditation. The victimization of women is further demonstrated in the haste and ruthlessness with which Maru arranges the marriage of Moleka and Dikeledi. Although Dikeledi is born into royalty and has a profession as a teacher in the school at Dilepe she proves incapable of fighting the sexual abuse and arrogance of Moleka, who is notorious for his sexual irresponsibility. Between Prince Ramagodi and Chief Matenge of When Rain Clouds Gather and Moleka of Maru, the image of woman is that of a sexual object to be used and abused at will. Makhaya and Maru, however, stand for the new male humaneness which insists on seeing women as equal partners.

Head's novels can be seen as a systematic study of women's roles and handicaps in society, especially an unjust one like South Africa. She has also x-rayed their emotional, psychological, and spiritual endowments in the context of a
human society, sane and accommodating. Her women are invariably thrust into a hostile landscape from which they must grow and realize their identity. There are passionate women like Dikeledi and Paulina; reserved women like Maria and Margaret; wise old women like Mma Millepede; silent but self-confident women like Brigitte; loud and pushy women like Camilla; and frightened and mentally tormented women like Elizabeth.

Head assesses the Botswana woman's worth by the degree of inner strength, individuality, and drive with which she is able to rise above the brutalizing and restrictive role assigned her by an unimaginative society. The degree of humility and sincerity with which she adapts herself to a strange people and society contributes to the harmonious co-existence of all in her environment. In exploring their day-to-day activities Head does not fail to point out that quite often these women perpetuate their own problems through mental conditioning, and their acceptance of social norms and taboos and also because of unfounded inter-personal jealousies. For all, their lives are a constant struggle and movement towards self-discovery. If there is one fact about Bessie Head that stands out in all her novels, it is her love for the Botswana people, the land of Botswana, and humanity in general.

2.4 Buchi Emecheta: Reversing the Image of the African Woman

Buchi Emecheta is one of those Afro-feminists who prefer to be called feminists with a small ‘f’. Emecheta’s feminist orientation panders more to the African position which many ordinary Africans will subscribe to. And this she does in The Joys of Motherhood. It is the story of Nnu Ego whose inability to give birth to a child after her first marriage leads to the various conflicts in the novel. The story is not only that of Nnu Ego but by extension that of the problems all women
encounter when they encounter delays in giving birth to children, experiencing the real joys of motherhood. When this happens, the African man is quick to involve himself in the practice of polygamy in his bid to procreate and prove to the world that he is a man. This is where the problems of women begin. In *The Joys of Motherhood* Emcheta articulates the positive sides of African tradition as it reflects what feminism should be as far as she is concerned, a feminism that cherishes the invaluable contributions of both men and women in upholding the family as the nucleus of the larger society. Her own feminism does not see men as enemies. For her, a woman should not only submit to the wishes of a man as a father, she owes the obligation to do so to him as a husband.

In Emcheta’s view, the ideal happy marriage is the one in which a woman bears children and looks after them, and the man looks after the welfare of both mother and children. But if the man, for reasons beyond his control, is unable to provide for his family the way he should, the woman comes in to play a supportive role. However, Emcheta does not really support Matriarchy. She believes it is the father’s primary duty to provide for his family only that the woman could come in once in a while to fill the vacuum usually created by the man’s inability. Unfortunately, feminism with its metropolitan mentality has changed things in which men had to be the sole providers; this new setting has robbed the women of their useful role.

Emcheta tells us that in trying to be supportive, in trying to be a thorough African woman, Nnu Ego loses her first child for Nnaife, and having seen that it does not pay to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos, she decides to play the game according to the new rules given to city women with Western orientation. She urges her husband to “go and look for a job” because “that is all I ask, nothing more” (Emcheta 1979:92). And in spite of Nnaife’s exuberance he could be responsible when situation demands. He proves his responsibility by sending his
three year earnings of sixty pounds to Nnu Ego while still at the war front. Not only this, he spends the one hundred pounds left in his passbook on Oshia’s education in Warri.

*The Joys of Motherhood* has been called Buchi Emecheta’s most outstanding novel. Beyond exhibiting the power of characterization, manipulation of point of view and narrative method, the novel offers a sustained exploration of the African woman’s experience, a much-needed theme in current African literary discourse. The paramount issue that still needs to be considered, however, is whether the academy today has a clearer picture of the conditions of African women than it had more than two decades ago when Maryse Conde spoke out against the heap of myths, rapid generalizations, and patent untruths that have clouded the personality and the inner reality of African women, and called on African women to speak for themselves. It is found troubling that even as African women are beginning to speak for themselves and to write about their lives, the popular misconception of African Women as slaves, brutalized and abused by a patriarchal society, still overwhelmingly defines Western critical attitudes.

Nnu Ego, the novel’s protagonist, is seen as the quintessential African woman. Her experiences and responses to her world are thus perceived as ideal representations of African women’s existence and as an indictment of a culture in which women have little control over their lives. The list of evils that scholars accuse Africa of heaping on its women is long. They claim that the African practices of polygamy and bride price degrade women to the status of goods and chattel; that husbands dominate their wives and that fathers dominate their daughters, ensuring a system of perpetual subjugation of women; that girls do not have the same opportunities as boys because they are valued solely for the money that they bring to their fathers through their bride price; that girls have no choice in whom they marry and that sexual relationships are unromantic because fathers
sell their daughters to the highest bidder and as evidence of their relegation to the background of social and political decisions in the family and the community, that women are forced to live in the outhouses in the backyard.

Male chauvinism is surely at its peak in traditional society where females are regarded by males as little better than goods and chattels. If they are wives, then their main use is as vehicles for procreation, thus immortalizing the husband’s name and ensuring the continuity of his line; if they are daughters, the fathers’ only interest in them relates to the amount of money they will bring into his coffers in the form of bride price. The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* opens with a powerful but disturbing description of its heroine, Nnu Ego. The reader is presented with the image of a woman in despair, suffering both mental and physical agony at the death of her first child but a second marriage. Convinced of her failure as a mother, she decides to kill herself:

*Nun Ego backed out of the room, her eyes unfocused and glazed, looking into Vacancy.... she ran as if she would never stop. Her baby.... her baby! Nnu Ego’s arms involuntarily went to hold her aching breasts, more for assurance of her Motherhood than to ease their weight. She felt the milk trickling out, wetting her bubu 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, running away from it. Yet it was inside of her. There was only one way to rid her or 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. (Emecheta 1979:7)

With such a portrait of Nnu Ego’s vulnerability and emotional instability are clearly evident through her physical demeanor and her mental process. Emecheta both foregrounds her narrative and initiates the reader into interrogating the principles that motivate her protagonist’s action. Why does Nnu Ego think that killing herself is a better option than meeting life’s challenges? Are her actions governed by certain cultural codes of conduct, or do they imply a type of character defect? Although there is enough sympathy for Nun Ego’s loss, the narrative clearly points out that within her world, Nnu Ego’s behavior is considered not only inappropriate, but irrational. The woman who helps by overpowering and saving Nun Ego from drowning herself, empathizes with her loss but quickly tells her “that out of six pregnancies she only had two children alive, yet she was still living” (Emecheta 1979:62). This declarative statement of survival against all odds is reinforced when, three months after the failed suicide attempt, Nnu Ego’s childhood friend, Ato, visits her. Contemplating Nnu Ego’s surroundings, untidy and disorderly, and Nnu Ego still in a daze, Ato asks, “Nnu Ego, the daughter of Agbadi, what has gone wrong with you? All because you lost a child? (Emecheta 1979:74). It must be noted that infant mortality was an ever-present reality of life for Nigerian women in the 1930s, the time in which Emecheta sets her novel. The ideal response, as the women in the novel demonstrate, is to contain the experience and continue with life. But for reasons that the novel consistently investigates, Nnu Ego cannot move on.

Thus, The Joys of Motherhood becomes an elaborate exploration of what went wrong with Nnu Ego. And the response that the novel presents has little to do
with cultural expectations. It has been said that Nnu Ego’s sense of disequilibrium is the result of the contrasts between two worlds in conflict. The old world, represented by the village life in Ibuza, was one in which men romanced their wives, women supported their families through farming, family ties were strong and emotional, and financial support was abundant. The new world represented by life in Lagos in bewildering and tiring. There is no room for extended family support, no land to be owned or cultivated, and women have to enter the world of trade to find money.

However, as Christina Davis has suggested, to read Nnu Ego’s inability to cope with her experiences as a consequence of the rift between village and city life avoids the major issues of the novel. It is apparent that Nnu Ego’s problem did not start in Lagos. Actually, the novel states that she is sent to Lagos to find peace, as a last act of redemption. At Ibuza with all the emotional and financial support given to her, it was obvious to the villagers that Nun Ego was emotionally weak. Emecheta writes, “Wanting one thing at a time and wanting it badly” (Emecheta 1979:36). And the one thing Nun Ego wanted “badly” was motherhood. Paradoxically, at a time when women were trying desperately to divest themselves of some of the institutional baggage that oppressed them, Nnu Ego believes that the only way to be happy and fulfilled is in the traditional role of motherhood. Emecheta makes it clear; however, that Nnu Ego’s impulsive desire for children is not compelled by her love for them, or by some grand philosophical belief in the sanctity of human life. Her desire is spurred by a selfish vision of their future value to her. In defense of her views, she tells her father, “When one grows old, one needs children to look after one. If you have no children, and your parents have gone, who can you call your own?” (Emecheta 1979:38).

But it is worth nothing even within her world; Nnu Ego’s global outlook is recognized as being terribly limited. Both her father and his best friend Idayi often
comment on what they see as Nnu Ego’s misplaced sense of values. However, as Idayi reminds his friend, “she was not born then; she was born in her own time. Things have changed a lot” (Emecheta 1979:37). To survive in her world, Nnu Ego must acquire foresight, self-reliance, creativity, and flexibility to adapt to changing realities. These are the real tests for Nnu Ego, and she fails all of them as she clings to failed institutions and beliefs. In making her choices, Nnu Ego not only fails herself and her mother, she also fails the other women in the community. One of Nnu Ego’s mistakes is that during times of personal crises she rejects the help and comfort that the other women in the community offer her.

Solidarity among African women is a long-standing avenue of survival for women. But Nnu Ego, in her obsessive pursuit of motherhood and her inability to see beyond her limited self, consistently refuses the offers of assistance and grace given to her. For critics who insist on seeing African women solely as victims of patriarchal agencies, it is possible to dismiss the role of African women as agents for communal support and female survival in their communities, and to see them as agents for promoting and advancing female oppression. The Joys of Motherhood serve as a collaborative clique in inculcating Nnu Ego’s spirit of submission: at two stages in the character’s life as an independent woman, she is approached by women from her villages that monitor her consciousness. The truth, however, is that at no time in the novel is Nnu Ego approached by women who coerce her to submit. Buchi Emecheta clearly points out that throughout Nnu Ego’s life there are people around her offering to help her.

In the home of her first husband, in Ibuza, women sympathize with her plight and her trials in trying to have a child. Nnu Ego’s relationship with the other women in the Amatonwu compound was amicable, Emecheta writes that the younger wife did not keep her new son to herself but allowed Nnu Ego as the senior wife to share in looking after him. Despite her failure to have a child, Nnu
Ego is not taunted or mistreated by the other women. She is respected and honored as the first wife. The younger wife gives her the opportunity to help nurture and raise her son. Yet Nnu Ego is neither grateful nor satisfied.

On the eve of the day of Amatokwu’s second wife giving birth; the pain hit Nnu Ego with such a force that she could stand it no longer. When she thought no one was looking, she took the boy and went into her own inner room, forgetting to lock her door. She began to appeal to the boy to either be her child or send her some of his friends from the other world. Not knowing she was being watched, she put the child to her breasts. The next things she felt was a double blow from behind. She almost died of shock to see her husband there. Nnu Ego continues her pattern of rejecting the support of friendship of other women after leaving Ibuza for her new community in Lagos. There, married to a new man, Nnaife, Nnu Ego is again surrounded by women who rally on her behalf, as is the custom, and attempt to teach her lessons in survival. They loan her money to start a business and teach her how to prosper with it. The women realize that a woman without her own economic power is not free, and they attempt to teach Nnu Ego that a mother who cannot provide for her own children, however doting she might be, is no mother at all. When Nnu Ego follows the women’s advice, she reaps the benefits of making her own money and improving her life.

But as in every area of her life, she ultimately fails. Once she loses her first child, Ngozi, everything changes. She lapses again into her obsession with motherhood and self-pity. Nnu Ego tells herself that the life she had indulged in with the baby Ngozi had been very risky. She had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child. This time she was going to play it according to the new rules. Nnu misinterprets her situation. She is not playing by the new rules. In making herself totally dependent on her husband, Nnaife, for
survival and happiness; she is playing by the old rules, or perhaps by rules that never existed for Igbo women, because historically Igbo women, whether as subsistence farmers or traders, have always been expected to contribute significantly to the economic well-being of the family.

2.5 Failure to Change with the Times and to Adapt Psychologically

Failure to change with the times, to adapt psychologically, and to make tangible plans for the future is a form of madness. Throughout the narrative a correlation between Nnu Ego’s behavior and madness is constantly implied. In fact, the text traces the gradual mental deterioration of its heroine. The first reference to her mental instability occurs after she is brought to Lagos to meet her second husband, Nnaife. Overanxious and exhausted, Nnu Ego lapses into one of her nightmare visions about motherhood. She talks in her sleep. Her brother in law awakens her and in the effort to comfort her says, “You will see your hopes fulfilled and I shall come and visit you again when you are really mad”. The text points out that he is referring to “the saying that women talk and behave like mad people with their infants who are too young to make sense of any noises” (Emecheta 1979: 46).

After Nnu Ego loses her first child, tries to commit suicide, and fails, her friend Ato brings up the question again. Trying to get Nnu Ego to realize the consequences of her actions, Ato tells her:

Please take that lost look from your face. If you wear a look like that for long, do you realize what people are going to say? They are going to say, ‘You know the beautiful daughter of Agbadi, the
one his mistress had for him, the one who had a slave one as her chi, the one who tried to steal her mate’s child, the one who tried to kill herself and failed on purpose so as to get sympathy well, she is now completely mad. (Emecheta 1979: 74)

These warnings, however, are not enough to stop Nnu Ego’s destructive impulses. By the end of the novel, overwhelmed by circumstances, Nnu Ego becomes clinically mad. For a while Nnu Ego bore it all without reaction, until her senses started to give way. She became vague, and people pointed out that she had never been strong emotionally. She used to go to the sandy square called Otinkpu, near where she lived, and tell people there that her son was in “Emelika,” and that she had another one also in the land of the white men, she could never manage the name Canada. After much wandering on one night, Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. Is Nnu Ego a victim of society?

Although Emecheta shows considerable sympathy towards Nnu Ego’s predicament, she draws attention to the principle of individual responsibility. It is significant that as Nnu Ego nears her premature and lonely death, watching everything she has sacrificed her life for dissipate; she arrives at a moment of recognition. With clarity of vision acquired through a lifetime of horrifying self-denial, she acknowledges that something has gone terribly wrong. Nnu Ego questions the path she has crafted for herself. She “told herself that she would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship; but she had never had the time” (Emecheta 1979: 219).
However, like an archetypal heroine in a tragic story, Nnu Ego experiences her
glimpse of enlightenment too late.

_The Joys of Motherhood_ turn out to be the sorrows of motherhood for Nnu
Ego. She achieves little if any fulfillment in the choices she makes. The point
Emecheta makes with the ironic title of the novel is that there is no joy in life or
motherhood for a woman who chooses to live an isolated, anachronistic life in a
changing world. Perhaps this is why Nnu Ego chose to be silent after her death,
refusing to answer the prayers of women who ask her for children. Obviously, the
women asking her for children do not realize the consequences of their prayers.
Having lived through such a life, Nnu Ego knows that motherhood does not
always bring happiness and that, ultimately, women have the right to choose their
own destiny. A woman must learn to feel fulfilled in her, and in letting herself
freely accept the hand of friendship from others.

### 2.6 The Subjugation of the African Woman in The Slave Girl

In order to clearly see the subjugation of the woman in Emecheta’s _The
Slave Girl_ it is important that we find out what the status of the woman is. This is
because closely related to how a woman is treated is her status. Even though it has
been a source of debate among scholars, the status of the African woman is clear.
In traditional African societies, she is perceived as being less than a man. While
there are undeniable differences between societies, and the roles of women in
traditional societies are varied, women generally bring up the rear and are known
to be involved only when the issue of the moment was anything but a serious one.
One attitude that has remained constant is the belief that a woman is naturally
weak, naive and negative. Emecheta through her characters raises three issues in
relation to the status of the woman in *The Slave Girl*. These three issues are: Slavery, Marriage and Possession.

Slavery is Emechta’s paramount concern in *The Slave Girl*. Her reason for exploring the theme of slavery so faithfully in this novel is to stress the point that the African woman is being treated like a slave. In other words, she is subjugated by her own people and after marriage, by her husband. Emechta’s heroine, Ogbanje Ojebeta, is sold by her brother, Okolie, because he needs money for his coming-of-age dance. Important issues like responsibility, family ties and trust were not his worry; instead; his desire to satisfy his needs was the driving force. By implication, Emechta is saying that the society permits Okolie to exchange his sister for money because she is a woman.

Thus, the point Emechta is making is that the African woman is, in the hands of her family, an object for sale. After paying eight pounds for Ojebeta, Okolie now hands over his sister to Ma Palagada and she becomes Ma Palagada’s property or chattel. Objebeta on the other hand now has a new master who can use her just like any property. On account of money having been paid for her, Objebeta loses not only her identity, but also her individuality and sense of belonging. “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” (Emecheta 1977:74).

Emecheta’s depiction of her female characters in this novel leaves no reader in doubt about the dehumanizing condition of the African woman. It is also said about Pa Palagada that “each time their mistress had gone to another village to sell her abada cloth; Pa Palagada would call her (Chiago) to his room on any pretext. Many a time she had come out feeling physically ill and sick at heart” (Emecheta
1977:97). But, Pa Palagada is not the only one who uses Chiago in the house. Clifford, Ma’s son had treated Chiago in a like manner. Chiago painfully recalls this incident.

I remember the last time. I was foolish in those days. I was bending down sweeping the floor when he came up behind me and jumped on me. He pulled at the small breast I had then .... I was not at all developed .... It hurt so, and I screamed. Do you know that he did? He slapped me hard on both sides of my face. I cried and told his mother, and was ordered to shut up. He must have told some story to his father because for quite a long time he would cane me mercilessly for any little thing I did. (Emecheta 1977: 97)

Like Objebeta, Chiago is a slave in Ma’s house and is sexually harassed by Ma’s husband and son. Her sexual harassment is besides her normal duties in the house as a slave. Emecheta therefore presents the African woman as a slave without identity, respect or dignity. At the end of it all, Chiago is pregnant by Pa Palagada and when Ma Palagada eventually dies, Chiago becomes the wife of Pa Palagada. The implication is that the African woman is nothingness personified. She toils, drudges, serves and marries to bear children for the man. She is deprived of her dignity and honor. She is owned, possessed and used. In a few words, the status of the African woman is that of a slave. As a slave, the woman is bought by a master who enslaves, exploits and relegates her to a position he decides is befitting to her. This is the subjugation we see through the eyes of Emecheta in this novel. The Slave Girl is a novel that makes the suggestion that marriage as an institution is another form of enslavement. In African societies in
particular, and the world over in general, marriage is considered as the crown of womanhood. For this reason, a woman without a husband is simply despised and disrespected in society. However, marriage is far from bringing about happiness. Freedom or liberation for the African Woman simply becomes a method through which the African woman departs from one master and comes under the control of another.

The one major token through which a marriage is legally established in Africa is in the payment of the bride price. The very moment the bride price is paid, the girl ceases to belong to her parents and becomes the property of her husband. In other words, the suggestion is made in this novel that there is a close affinity between buying a slave and the payment of the bride price. Let us look at the two instances money was paid for Ojebeta by Ma Palagada and Jacob. When the realization dawns on Ojebeta that she has been sold into slavery by her brother, we are told she was, “almost fainting with that kind of disappointment and sense unfairness which is sometimes inexplicable” (Emecheta 1977: 60).

The breaking of Ojebeta’s charms is very symbolic. It is symbolic in two senses. First, it means that from this moment onwards. Ojebeta has broken the links between herself and her parents. From this very moment, all the ties that bound her to her parents are forcefully broken, and she belongs to somebody else. In the second place, this incident is symbolic of the fact that money has been paid on her head so she has lost all claims to any identity or individuality. After Jacob has paid her bride price and married Ojkebeta in Church, we are told that whether they loved and cared for each other was irrelevant as there is a bond between a husband and a wife brought about by “centuries of tradition, taboos and latterly Christian dogma” (Emecheta 1977:184), that requires a wife as a slave to obey and honor her husband who is her head, soul, father and heart. And that because of this, Ojebeta had little or no room to assert herself to exercise her individually or
feelings for these were entwined in Jacob’s who had paid for her. The tragedy that befalls Ojebeta towards the end of the novel is due to the fact that the money Ma Palagada paid for her has not been repaid. It is this realization that prompts Jacob to speak to Clifford in the following way; “swear by this Bible that you will not wish my wife evil, nor harm her or her children anymore” (Emecheta 1977:188).

In a similar manner, Owezim asks Clifford to swear by his dead parents that no harm will befall Ojebeta. It is after the eight pounds is paid back to Clifford that Ojebeta feels she has regained her freedom: “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”. (Emecheta 1977: 189). Emecheta makes the point that the African woman is an object for purchase and sale. Once Ojebeta has been bought by Ma Palagada, she remains her possession. For this commodity to change hands to that of a new buyer, the first buyer must be settled. Emecheta’s heroine (Ojebeta) is very much aware of this. The moment Jacob settles Clifford; she kneels down before him saying, “thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house I could not wish for a better master” (Emecheta 1977: 190).

Marriage therefore is for Ojebeta another form of slavery. Formerly, she was under Ma Palagada but now her new Master is Jacob. Thus, the novel makes the suggestion that there is an inextricable link between slavery and marriage. In fact, Ojebeta’s reason for visiting her Ibuza home after the death of Ma Palagada is to tell her family, “That if she ever married or ever belonged to somebody else, that person would refund to the Palagadas whatever Ma had given Okolie for her”. (Emecheta 1977:149).

This very statement makes it abundantly clear that there is a close connection between slavery and marriage. The suggestion is made that for the African woman, all her life belongs to somebody. In her own home, she is owned
by her people and when she grows up; her people give her out to a husband who pays something for her. The husband who pays something for her automatically becomes her new master. Thus, the status and position of the African woman is such that she is perpetually somebody’s property. Whether she is at home with her family, whether she is sold into slavery or married to a man, she must belong to someone. The deeper meaning of all these is that the African woman completely lacks identity or individually.

Ojobeta’s story leaves no one in doubt as to the fact that the African woman is owned by someone. At a very early age, Ojobeta loses her parents. Both Okwuekwu and his wife die of Felenza, an epidemic. In spite of the death of Ojobeta’s father and mother, her two brothers inherit her. It is the realization that Ojobeta is now his property that prompts Okolie to sell her to Ma Palagada when he is hard-pressed. Okolie’s action is symptomatic of the fact that Ojobeta is merely his possession, one that he can exchange for money anytime the need arises.

Okoie would rather see Ojobeta as a property than a person. After his expensive coming of age dance, Okolie is forced to marry a wife even though he could not afford the bride price. After his marriage, trouble sets in because he hates farm work and as such could not feed his wife. The marriage is therefore broken and Okolie, we discover later, is in Lagos. When Ojobeta returns home from Ma Palagada’s, her two brothers – Owezion and Okolie have deserted Ibuza. “Okolie has gone to Olu Oyibo a long time ago, and so has your brother Owezion before him. They are in a place called Lagos. Your elder brother works in a big ship – as big as a village and now he has four sons and a girl” (Emecheta 1977:158).

This is the reply Ojobeta gets from Utech on arriving at Ibuza, when she asks after her two brothers. The fact that Ojobeta’s two brothers are not at home
does not mean that Ojebeta does not have an owner. Her other relatives begin a scramble for her possession. Ukabegwu tells her “Come and live with us. Don’t you know that the great-grandfather of your father and my great-grandfather were of the same mother and father? So how can you think you have no father when I am here? If your brother Owezion should die, your bride price will come to me” (Emecheta 1977: 159).

Ukabegwu’s statement is to the effect that Ojebeta can never lack an owner. In other words, as already noted, she must belong to somebody. Even though her two blood brothers are not at home, she will never lack someone who will give her away and collect the bride price. Thus, it is that the African woman must be somebody’s possession. Besides Ukabegwu, there is Ojebeta’s other relations, Utech and her husband, who are anxious to accommodate Ojebeta. Thus, in African societies “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 a group or homestead” (Emecheta 1977: 98). As already stated, the important thing is that the African woman does not belong to herself but must at each point of her life belong to one person or the other.

This is Emecheta’s concern in the novel. By and large, in portraying the condition of the African woman in this novel, Emecheta talks about slavery and relates it to the status of the woman in Africa. She makes the point that the African woman is just like a slave because she must have a master and be treated like a mere property. The suggestion is also made that the institutions of marriage is another form of enslavement. This explains why our heroine, Ojebeta, passes from Ma Palagada to a new master, Jacob. Whether as a slave or as a housewife, the African woman is subjected to the same conditions under different masters In short, Feminism as an ideology has given birth to many literary theories. Feminists are seen as ranging from biologically determined as is the case in radical feminist
thought, which argues that only women can be feminists, to notions of feminists as individuals who have undergone some type of political transformation theoretically achievable by anyone. Some theorists have in fact supported the idea that only women can defend female interests and be feminists. And extremists have gone further to claim that women's victimhood will exist as long as they live in a male-centered world. Hence females should set a world apart entirely made of women themselves, in other words, a lesbian world. Other theorists, on the contrary, recognize man's centrality in life but favor women's rights. Some of them affirm that feminism is not necessarily related to the biological sex, and that men also may be feminists.

But the racist hints of western theories have made African and African American females find other ways to fight victimhood. In fact, western literary theorists have first totally ignored black female victimhood and then they have failed to discern the socio-cultural and economic differences. Black women have lived historical events which have shaped their cultural, economic and political realities, and white women, or at least, in their great majority, have lived them from the privileged side. Thus, black females have set a black feminist thought which consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it.