THE SLAVE GIRL

The gendered perspective of Emecheta's fictional art comes into full force as she exposes the feminine stereo types of male writers such as Achebe, Amadi and others, revealing the dark underside of their fictional celebrations of the African. She explores the psychological and physical toll on women of such things as arranged marriages, polygamy, perpetual pregnancy and child birth, and widowhood. The female figures hovering in the side wings and background or burdened with symbolic cargo in male-authored African fiction are brought centrestage by Emecheta, and an entirely new drama emerges as a result of this radical change in gender perspective.

With each novel Emecheta moves progressively backward. In The Joys of Motherhood, The Bride Price and The Slave Girl we move backward historically from the 1960's of the first two books through the fifties, forties, thirties and finally to the early decades of the century. The cycle begins from her infancy and childhood in the The Slave Girl and her adolescence, marriage and motherhood in The Bride Price and The Joys of Motherhood. As Katherine Frank says:

Not only, then, does Emecheta explore the plight of the contemporary woman torn between her African culture and her feminist aspiration, she also searches the past, the traditional worlds of her mother and grandmothers, in order to fathom the origin of her current entrapment between Two Visions, Two Worlds, Two destinies. ¹

This appears clearly when one observes her novels chronologically.

In *The Slave Girl* Emecheta explores her central vision of female bondage and her underlying metaphor of African Womanhood as a condition of victimization and servitude. The tyrants and oppressors who reduce women to slaves vary from novel to novel, from husbands and racist whites in *Second Class Citizen* to traditional mores and taboos in *The Bride Price*, to men in *The Slave Girl*, and finally to children in *Joys of Motherhood*. But whoever or whatever the enslaving power may be, the oppression of women is an unvarying constant. Emecheta's voice raised against oppression of women is one among the new voices Mariama Ba and Bessie Head currently crying out for the liberation of woman, the second-class citizen.

*The Slave Girl* is the story of a woman's quest for freedom played against the backdrop of early 20th century Africa. The novel is close in some respects to the mood and theme of *The Bride Price*. Here, there is a brooding sense of fate that moulds the woman's identity and role. In *The Slave Girl*, destiny is linked with a tradition-rooted sense of order which shapes the history and values of the woman's community. The slave motif implied in *The Bride Price* is more fully developed here. The institution of slavery is again a cultural symptom of what Emecheta deplores as the woman's servile status in African societies. As in *The Bride Price*, the symbolism of slavery is even more crucial when it is applied to the woman's private sense of self. Her dependency, apathy, and ingrained habit of accepting a subordinate status — all these are equated and Emecheta is opposing all these oppressive systems and traditions of all kinds in this novel.

In this novel, Emecheta presents her central vision of female bondage, her
underlying metaphor of African womanhood as a condition of victimization and servitude. The narrative revolves round the life of a young Ibo woman in rural Nigeria and the story begins with her childhood. Ojebeta is born early in the 20th century in the village of Ibuza, the first female child to survive for her parents after a long series of stillbirths and infant deaths. Such joy in a daughter’s birth is extremely rare:

Girl children were not normally particularly praised creatures, but her father had lost so many that they now assumed a quality of preciousness.2

Both her parents lavish love and attention on their precious daughter. Her father makes a long and dangerous journey to Idu to purchase charms to protect Ojebeta from the spirits. But such indulgences abruptly end when both her parents succumb to influenza leaving her an orphan. Shortly after the death of her parents, she is taken by her younger brother to Onitsha where he sells her to Ma Palagada, a distant relative.

Ma Palagada is one of the successful market women of Onitsha, and Ojebeta joins her household as one of several slave girls who assist her in the market as well as at home. As Ojebeta grows up to become an attractive young woman, she learns the limitations of being a woman in her society. As a slave girl, she sees and experiences the slave’s absolute lack of rights and privileges. When she eventually obtains her freedom, after Ma Palagada’s death, she discovers that being a “free” woman does not mean freedom from the male’s dominance. She is still the man’s possession although the man in this case is her husband whom she marries shortly after leaving

the Palagadas, the novel shows that she has simply exchanged one kind of servitude for another. The novel ends on a grimly ironic note:

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.  

At the outset, Ojebeta’s life seems to be very uncharacteristic of the African situation because her birth is eagerly anticipated and she is cherished as the only female child of her mother to survive infancy. Orphaned at the age of seven, when she is passing from dependent infancy to young girlhood, she is sold off by her brother to a distant relative for eight pounds, so that he could purchase scarves, anklets, and beads for his coming-of-age dance costume. Thus begins what can be regarded as the first phase of her servitude. But, even as a slave, the young Ojebeta seems in many ways the Emecheta heroine. She is beautiful, intelligent, and head strong, restive, unhappy and yearning even in her constrained existence. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of her servitude at the Palagadas is that it is not an entirely abhorrent life. She forms close bonds with a number of other slave girls and even Ma Palagada seems a kind of foster-mother to her at times.

Here woman’s relationship with her community is set against a broad historical background, one which links Ojebeta’s story with the history of her village, with contemporary events in colonial Africa as a whole, and finally, with the universal phenomenon of the unending cycle of life and death. The prologue to the novel

3. ibid. p.179.
describes the founding of Ojebeta's village, generations before her birth, by an Ibo prince. He had settled in this section of Nigeria after having been exiled from his own community due to the accidental death of his opponent in a wrestling match. Thus, the beautiful village Ibuza was created out of death itself. The prologue of the novel describes the beauty of the village:

The river Oboshi washed the area on one side, a very deep, clear river with so many fish that in those days Umeju could almost catch them with his bare hands. From the other side ran the Atakpo stream which was also extremely useful to those early farmers; it was quite shallow falling through many rocks and it was a beauty to watch. It had clear sands in which grew a myriad African tropical plants with broad leaves that looked as if they had been washed clean by some delicate invisible hand. 4

This suggestion about the creation of life out of death serves as a prologue to the birth of Ojebeta herself. Since she is the first child to survive after the deaths of many children, her birth, which symbolises the emergence of life, is a paradigm for Ibuza's own history. And this history of the village and the circumstances of Ojebeta's birth are analogous to the broader sweep of contemporary African situation. A strange disease had been killing the African population before and after the birth of Ojebeta. This disease, called the white man's 'felenza' (influenza) by the African, is believed to be an eruption or another manifestation of a sinister disease – that is the presence of Europeans in Africa. For, the people of Ojebeta's village had never been free from the feeling that the arrival of white men had changed their African world for the worse. The killer disease is very cleverly described:

4. ibid. p.10.
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 has killed many people in Iseb Azagba, it is creeping to Ogwashi, 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…

Here Emecheta describes the people’s reaction to, and fear of, this mysterious disease with the touch of one who is rooted in that culture. There is an immediacy in the way she brings out the feelings of people who speculate innocently and hope to 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.

But soon this ‘felenza’ came to Ogwashi, and within days, men started dropping down dead on their farms. Death was always so sudden that the relatives were too shocked to cry. As the story proceeds, we find that this disease had carried away all the worthy men from the Ogwashi. We find it in the words of Oteh, the aunt of Ojebeta. Her lament was true that the felenza had carried away the men who were men; what they were left with were the ghosts of men.

One of these ‘ghosts’ is Okolie, the younger brother of Ojebeta, who sells her into slavery. He is no doubt a selfish man, who sells his pretty little orphaned sister for the
sake of his own personal happiness.

He is a never-do-well who eventually sneaks away from the village to look for a white man’s job after he had failed miserably as a farmer and as a husband. He is a lazy man. One can compare him with Adizua in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, a wastrel and socially a ‘nobody’ being the son of an unsteady man who deserted his wife for another woman. Though Okolie is not a ‘nobody’ in the society, he makes himself one by his way of living. Emecheta presents him as one who is ‘born to be led’,

But is there not a saying that there are those who are born to lead and those who are born to be led? Indeed, Okolie had the height of a near giant, his skin shone like painted ebony, his waist was as small as that of a snake and his shoulders were like those of two men put together. He also had the energy of three men. But he was not born to use all this. ⁸

In every way he proves unworthy of the honour of being the son of a strong and hard working man Okwuekwu.

Within a few short years after her own birth and survival which affirm the continuity of life, Ojebeta learns about another continuity, that of death when the epidemic of influenza wiped out her parents and several other villagers: “that the whole world was dying, one by one”. ⁹

Emecheta continues to underscore the links between women and their community as the central issue of her fiction. This influence is emphasized very clearly at the

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⁸ ibid. p.84.
⁹ ibid. p.27.
beginning of the novel. The woman who acts as midwife cannot enter the compound of Ojebeta’s father because it is taboo for a woman to be in the house of an “Alo”, a titled man, when she is menstruating and so unclean. This passing reference to the taboo is almost casual, but its implications are significant. The novelist is drawing our attention to the degree to which the woman’s body is her fate, for it is really a kind of biological destiny designed by society rather than by nature, one that limits her identity, surrounds her with taboos, and even restricts her physical mobility.

Emecheta handles the theme of slavery on the broad scale on which she develops the issues of history, life, and death in the novel. Thus, Ojebeta’s experiences as a slave girl are related to indigenous slavery in Africa itself (which we find in Alex Haley’s *Roots* and other novels), the history of the European slave trade in Africa, and African complicity in that trade, and slavery as an allegory of the woman’s traditional status in society, irrespective of whether she is technically “slave” or “free”. Emecheta is unsparing in her handling of African slave traders and slave owners, making no distinction between the local practice and the European version. In this regard, she stands shoulder to shoulder with many writers like Haley, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Ama Ata Aidoo. Aidoo’s play *Anowa* also dramatizes trenchantly the issue of slavery in its various aspects.

Both Emecheta and Aidoo, understandably, insist that a ‘slave is a slave is a slave’, a mere possession that has been denied his or her humanity. Aidoo, like Emecheta, links the history of African slavery with the tradition of female subordination in her play. Emecheta is no less incisive and trenchant in her assessment.
She underscores the basic similarity between all forms of slavery, and she draws certain links between African slave traders or slave owners, and their European counterparts. Hours after Okolie sells his young sister into slavery, his attitude and bearing remind the narrator of the past. In his greediness for money he searches every corner in the hotel for money. The scene is described by Emecheta in a sarcastic manner.

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. His attitude recalled those days when it was easy for the European to urge the chief of a powerful village to wage war on a weaker one in order to obtain slaves for the New World. 10

Although Ma Palagada has no direct connection with the old European slave trade, the novelist carefully links the formidable market woman with the European tradition of colonialism and slavery. As a young woman Palagada was the concubine of a Portuguese man, living, that is, with a representative of the nation that pioneered European slave trading on the West African coast centuries before. Ma Palagada can be compared to the signorases of Saint - Louis and Gou. These women in Senegal often possessed numerous domestic slaves, trading craft and houses, as well as quantities of gold and silver jewellery and splendid clothing. Indisputably, they knew how to acquire wealth, how to employ it profitably, and how to enjoy it as well.

10. ibid. p.73.
Emecheta has defined slavery as a brutal continuity in human history, one that is interwoven, in this novel, with the historical persistence of women's subordination and powerlessness. She develops this link effectively by dwelling on the emotional and moral implications of slavery itself for the slave, before examining the psyches of 'free' and enslaved women. In emotional and psychological terms, slavery impresses upon each slave her essential worthlessness as a human being. Chiago, one of the older slaves in Ma Palagada's household still remembers a slave girl, in another town, who was buried alive with her master's dead wife in order to satisfy a technical requirement for the funeral. In a similar way, the slave's day-to-day existence requires her to accept the status of being a mere thing, because the institution destroys all sense of individuality. This is poignantly brought out through the character of Chiago. When Ojebeta requests Chiago to allow her to keep the charms and cowries that her parents tied round her neck, Chiago experiences the pathos of the situation:

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.

But what Chiago could do within the permissible limits of the system she does. She allows Ojebeta to keep them secretly. As a mere thing, the slave is expected to suppress normal self-expression. When she was introduced to other girls by Ma Palagada, Ojebeta saw that the girls were very much frightened whenever they were addressed by their owner. The reader is told how

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11. ibid. p.72.
She did not know then that she too, 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. 

Slavery is not simply a status or role in Emecheta’s novel. It is also a condition, a way of thinking and acting. In keeping with her usual interest in the attitudes as well as condition of society’s victims, Emecheta insists in this novel on the degree to which the victim contributes to her own victimization, by allowing herself to accept the role of victim. But Emecheta says that it takes a long time for the slave girl to learn to be somebody else.

Quite apart from the actual brutality and degradation in being slaves, the most crucial difficulty in the lives of these young women is the degree to which they have developed a slave mentality. This mentality allows them to accept, even support, the status quo. One of the men slaves Jienuaka would never be disloyal to his master. He acts like the head of the other slaves. Emecheta describes him thus:

Even in this short minute of freedom, the slave mentality was still dominant in him. Jienuaka was the type who, although he could enjoy a joke, would never be disloyal to his master. It never occurred to any of them, not even the other male servants, to say ‘no’ to Jienuaka, for he was such a formidably big person, so tall, so broad of shoulder and so strong that his nickname - “Agwhele” - meant a giant.

Although she manages to remain less servile than most of the other slaves around her, Ojebeta herself is quite capable of feeling grateful for having been enslaved by

12. ibid. p.87.
13. ibid. p.102.
Ma Palagada, whenever the latter shows some special kindness to her slaves. When Ma Palagada presented them the bale of blue Muslin cloth for their dresses, the joy that they feel is indescribable. They praise Ma for her kindness. And for sometime the harsher aspects of being a Palagada slave girl receded temporarily. They thank Ma:

Thank you, Ma, for being so kind to us. May god make you prosper the more.  

Christianity plays a somewhat ambiguous role here. On the one hand, it is the familiar palliative for the enslaved and the outcast. It gives the slave girls a sense of belonging, of even being special. Christianity is associated with social conservatism among the Igbo of Nigeria and the Creoles of Sierra Leon. Missions discouraged Igbo women’s participation in the politically important female association, and limited their education to Bible study and the learning of European domestic skills.

The missionary influence on the Igbo was great. These Christian missions were established in Igbo land in the late nineteenth century. A majority of Igbos eventually became Christians for they had to profess Christianity in order to attend mission schools. This is presented in Achebe’s novels. Boys were sent to school with the hope of getting better economic positions. But girls were not allowed to receive the same type of education. In the mission schools or in the special training homes they were taught European domestic skills and the Bible, often in the vernacular. The missionaries’ avowed purpose in educating girls was to train them for Christian

marriage and motherhood, not for jobs or for citizenship. The main focus of these missionaries was the church, and for the church, they needed Christian families.

Churchgoing and missionary influence helped them to change only to a certain extent. In the beginning, people were reluctant to send their own children to these missionary schools. They sent their domestic slaves to these foreign learning places. The slaves were allowed to go to these schools, so long as their going did not interfere with their daily tasks. In *The Slave Girl* Emecheta used this idea of sending slaves to the missionary schools. Mrs. Simpson was the wife of the new United Africa Company chief and she helped to run the local Church Missionary Society School. She wanted Ma Palagada to send some of her slaves, and Ma Palagada acceded to it.

For the girls it was a great excitement. 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. 15

Churchgoing allows them to be seen as elite slaves, and a Christian education gives them the literacy, which places them above the mere “illiterate pagans.” The missionaries lured these people with better economic prospects, jobs and easier ways of living. For example, Ma Palagada was granted more market stalls for this, and because of her connections with the missionaries, she could buy any imported item at wholesale price before her rivals had time to do so. So she became doubly rich.

15. ibid. p.102.
Seeing that conversion from nothing to Christianity brought Ma financial rewards, a number of smaller traders followed suit and when the 'nobodies' saw that the rich were all going to this new place called church, many were converted to this fashionable religion. As a result, with great enthusiasm the first Christ Church Cathedral was built in Onitsha. Churchgoing became a daily routine to Palagada’s and Ma was regarded everywhere as an enviable and god-fearing woman.

In the novel Ojebeta’s enduring devoutness as Christian is ambiguous. It is a symptom of the degree to which she continues to be largely docile and long-suffering, even after she gains her freedom, but in the final analysis her Christianity is also inseparable from those things, including her inner strength, which enable her to endure the trauma of slavery.

Education, as Wilhelmina Lamb has shown,

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.16

Emecheta has no faith in social change or in the prospect that the environment will ever grant African women freedom. Instead, they must wrest it from the environment themselves, and the only thing that will give them the power to do so is education. Hence, the only thing that will give them power to free themselves from the clutches of tradition is education. In The Slave Girl, we see the very rudiments of education

and the profound effect that even such scanty learning can have on women's lives. Ojebeta is allowed to attend Sunday school and here she learns to read Ibo, along with her friends. Emecheta expresses obvious glee as she describes the development,

They soon 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.  

The power of education for women is a double power, it is the first step towards social and sexual freedom and it also frees their hearts and minds. Emecheta's most autonomous and fulfilled heroine is the university-educated Adah in *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen*, while the most powerless and oppressed is the illiterate Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood*. Even Nnu Ego is conscious of the fact that there is a better future for educated girls in their society. Books can transport Emecheta's heroines from their own cramped, miserable world to far-off places and exciting experiences they could never know in their real lives. Hence Ojebeta's absorption in the Ibo story book. And in *Second Class Citizen*, education becomes the route to self-knowledge, as could be seen in Adah's eager reading of Flora Nwapa, James Baldwin and Karl Marx.

Ojebeta's later education, however, takes on the lineaments of traditional female learning. She leaves the Sunday school and is enrolled in an "academy," also run by the Englishwoman, where she learns such domestic skills as how to bake cakes, crochet, and embroider. And this training has the opposite effect of her earlier

17. The Slave Girl, p.105.
education. It serves to confine her to the appointed feminine sphere of domestic labour. Emecheta makes this abundantly clear in the case of Ojebeta. During her early days at the Palagadas, Ojebeta reflects:

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. 18

Even when she is released from her servitude and returns to Ibuza after Ma Palagada's death, Ojebeta does not feel herself free. Sometimes she thinks nostalgically of her stay at Otu Onitsha. Though she is regarded as the daughter of an illustrious man, she thinks of her past friends and life. Ojebeta is not free even in her society because, in a sense,

she was still not free now, for no woman or girl in Ibuza was free, except those who committed the abominable sin of prostitution or those who had been completely cast off or rejected by their people for offending one custom or another. A girl was owned, in particular, by her father or some one in place of her father or her older brother, and then, in general, by her group or homestead. 19

After returning to the village, she rediscovers personal independence and the security of traditional African life. Lloyd W.Brown comments:

18. ibid. p.112.
Emecheta's familiar broadsides against male shortcomings are overshadowed in this work by vigorous and repeated criticism of women as the main accomplices in their own enslavement. In one sense women are slaves as a matter of status. 20

The slave girl figure is therefore a broad sexual archetype. As possessions without freedom or privilege, the girls are sexual objects to be abused and sexually exploited at will by the men in the household. They are assigned an inferior and dependent status. They have to accept and follow it without any overt protest. A woman is obliged to subordinate her interests and desires to the will of her man or the collective will of the community. In this respect, they are symbols of the degree to which "free" women are essentially the possessions of the men in their world, first their fathers and brothers, then their husbands. Ojebeta's aunt, Utethe, could therefore be philosophical about the fact that Okolie had sold his sister into slavery. She reminds Ojebeta:

No woman is ever free. To be owned by a man is a great honour. So perhaps in a sense your brother was not too much in the wrong. 21

Okolie was not too much in the wrong when his actions are viewed in this light, his only real offence being that he failed to turn over the proceeds of the sale to his older brother, the one who had the right to sell Ojebeta in the first place. This cruel deed of selling the girl is given to them by custom. Ojebeta soon comes to the conclusion, after leaving the Palagadas, that no woman is really free. She laments:


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 are.²²

Ojebeta cuts her hair or shaves off every last vestige of her jet-black hair for fear that some body would cut a curl of her hair to marry her. This is another wicked custom in their society, which gives privilege to a boy in selecting his bride. Even when she marries a man of her own choice, she has to accept the fact that custom has made her his property. Eventually she moves to Lagos, a bustling city, to marry a hardworking educated man, Jacob. But after years of marriage, she finds herself selflessly serving her husband and family in a kind of domestic bondage. Paradoxically, she realizes that her role as wife and mother offers a limited but secure and joyful freedom within the boundaries of the traditional African family.

She might belong to Jacob body and soul, but she loved it. She could think of no other suitable life for herself and for her ill-clad children. ....... 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. ²³

The slave masters, the tyrannical oppressors in The Slave Girl are all men, and it is this vision of male oppression along with the literal condition of slavery in the novel which makes The Slave Girl the most overtly feminist of Emecheta’s

²². ibid. p.168.
²³. ibid. p.176.
books and the best one with which to approach her other writing. At the end of the book, Ojebeta marries a Westernized, Christian man and moves with him to Lagos. He is, as she says "a master of her own choice." But Emecheta tells us that it is pointless to speculate whether they loved and cared for each other forever after:

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 you 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. In her own way, Ojebeta was content and did not want more of life; she was happy in her husband, happy to be submissive, even to accept an occasional beating, because that was what she had been brought up to believe a wife should expect. 24

Despite the compensations of her life with the Palagadas, Ojebeta never acquiesces in her slavery with them, but the great irony of her story is that when she voluntarily chooses her own master, her husband Jacob, she seals her doom. There is no denying that by the end of the novel, the once beautiful, restive, hungry spirited Ojebeta is a broken woman. The novel concludes with Jacob's formal purchase of his wife from Clifford, the son of her previous owner, Ma Palagada. Ojebeta herself is "too defeated, too cowed, to be fully aware of her abasement"25 as Katherine Frank says. She kneels before her husband Jacob, and confesses

Thank you my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master.  

With her paltry education, not even the defiant and clever Ojebeta could hope to escape her fate totally. She had changed a lot both physically and mentally. Clifford was astonished at 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.  

She had been replaced by a thin, nervous, prematurely middle-aged and worn matron. The novel concludes with Jacob's formal purchase of his wife from Clifford.

But Emecheta herself has the last word. Ojebeta may capitulate, but her creator does not endorse her capitulation. The time is 1945, the year after Emecheta was born and she concludes the novel with a bitterly ironic statement:

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.  

It is a bitter pill to swallow, but it is a fact of history. A woman is a slave, ever a second class citizen and it is the bitter truth of life that women condition themselves so and accept it as something inevitable. An Ojebeta of Emecheta bows before the

27. ibid. p.179.
28. ibid. p.179.
inevitable but Emecheta does not. This is one aspect of the perceived reality and it is bound to change. It will soon be a thing of the past. The girl as a slave is past of history. The free girl is sure to emerge and she will. Adahs, Adakus, Debbies, Nkos, Bintus, Gwendolens and Kehindes are in the making. Emecheta has her vision of a new African woman, one who while subscribing to the tradition would assert her individuality and independence.