CHAPTER – 4

SHACKLES OF SLAVERY –

THE SLAVE GIRL
Buchi Emecheta, who primarily writes about women, explores female roles in great depth and challenges the customary ideas of women's function in society. Through her novels, she gives a clarion call to African women, oppressed by race, gender, and class to get united in order to re-examine history from their point of view.

Emecheta's fourth novel **The Slave Girl** (1977) is firmly rooted in Ibo culture and tradition. This novel, is a fictionalized biography of Emecheta's mother, Ogbanje Emecheta, who was sold into slavery by her brother for the price of a silk headtie which he needed for his cultural dance. It is a study on the oppression of women by men. It gives a vision of male oppression along with the literal condition of slavery in the novel which makes **The Slave Girl** the most overtly feministic of all of Emecheta's novels about which Katherine Frank remarks that,

> It is in this book that Emecheta most fully explores her central vision of female bondage, her underlying metaphor of African womanhood as a condition of victimization and servitude.

In the novel, **The Slave Girl**, Ogbanje Ojebeta, the protagonist's life, at the outset seems to be highly typical because she is the only female child of her mother to survive infancy. Hence she is eagerly anticipated and cherished. Though in Ibuza, joy in a daughter's birth is extremely rare, Ojebeta's parents rejoice in her birth. This perhaps makes Emecheta remark that, "Girl children were not normally particularly
prized creatures, but Ojebeta’s father had lost so many that they now assumed a quality of preciousness” (19).  

Ojebeta’s doting parents shower tremendous love and affection on such a precious daughter of their’s. They love her so much that her father, in order to save her from being lured away by the spirits into the next world, makes a long and dangerous journey to Idu to purchase charms to protect her. Even her mother stencils beautiful tattoos on her face. But such indulgences do not go on for long. They end abruptly because of the death of her parents. At the age of seven, Ogbanje Ojebeta is orphaned.  

Okelie, Ojebeta’s brother reasoning that “After all, a girl needed men to guide her”, sells her into slavery to a distant relative, a wealthy trader named Ma Palagada. Ma Palagada, who already owns five girl and two male slaves, lives far away in Onitsha. In order to quieten his guilty conscience Okelie thinks, “... her father, or any other man who would represent a father to her, or when she grew up a husband, so was not her brother the rightful person to decide the fate of little Ojebeta” (p.78). But Okelie’s true reasons for selling his sister are brazenly materialistic, he finally absolves his guilt through the rationale that, “Even if she was an only daughter, she was still only a daughter” (p.80). To Okelie his present need is of greater urgency than that of his sister, he sells her for eight pounds because he,
desperately needed whatever money came his way to prepare himself for his coming-of-age-dance ... to purchase strings of cowries and little bells ... large, colourful, ostrich features (p.41).

Through this, Emecheta points out at the malignant nature of men, and their attitude towards women. To them, the lives of women do not make the worth of even the ostrich features.

Ogbanje, "small, helpless, terrified, a little girl festooned with bells and cowrie shells, just like a slave prepared for sacrifice (59)", races through the market looking for an escape. She runs for refuge to Ma Mee, a fellow female, crying, "Save me, mother, for now I am lost" (59). She knew that a "mother" is emblematic of love and security and hence runs to her. But Ma Palagada who already colludes with Okelie to rob Ojebeta of her identity takes her along with her into her household.

Ogbanje Ojebeta slowly accepts Ma Palagada's feudalistic treatment of her slave girls as her "daughters". The slave girls are dressed up on Sundays in 'nice church outfits' and take "their designated places at the back of the church". This makes them feel totally indebted to her and they thank her saying, "Thank you Ma for being so kind to us. May God make you prosper the More"(107).

Ojebeta forms close bonds with a number of other slaves in the household of Ma Palagada. To her, Ma Palagada seems to be a kind of foster mother at times. Ojebeta in the Ma Palagada's house has plenty to eat, nice clothes to wear, and above all is introduced to education and various other household skills. At this point, Ogbanje's
captivity seems to be more of psychological nature than physical. Emecheta here introduces the readers to different categories of enslavement. To her, "The greatest type of slavery is the enslavement of ideas" rather than the enslavement of the body.

As the other heroines of Emecheta, the young Ojebeta is beautiful, intelligent, headstrong, and restively unhappy and yearning in her constrained existence. As she receives the rudiments of education at the Palagada's Wilhelmina observes that,

Education is the crucial liberating force in the lives of Emecheta's heroines, and in fact their degree of servitude is inversely proportional to the amount of education they receive.

Emecheta in this novel, graphically describes the dehumanization and sexual exploitation that are concomitant with slavery, she voices the disgust of the oppressed through Chiago, the eldest slave girl when she recalls with horror, how Pa Palagada,

... had insisted on her rubbing his back and cutting his nails, while he occasionally dipped his huge hands into her blouse. She had learned to stop protesting, to accept his attentions and be quite about it all ... (93-94).

The slave girls had to keep quite about the sexual harassment by the masters because they had nobody to plead with. Even Ma Palagada who treats the slave girls as 'daughters', refuses to interfere in
such matters as exploitation of the slave girls by her husband and son. Ogbanje, vexed by all these constantly pleads to God for her freedom, “Please, dear God, no, please must I be a slave for ever?” (126).

Ojebeta is released from her servitude only after the death of Ma Palagada. When her turn comes to accompany Victoria, Ma Palagada’s daughter to her home she refuses stubbornly and for the first time shouts back:

I am not going back to Bonny with you, I am going to my people. I am going home ... No Miss Victoria, I will not come with you, I shall pay back every penny my brother borrowed ... why should I go with you? (145).

Consequently, Ojebeta goes back to Ibuza, which joyfully welcomes her back into its bosom. But in a short period of time he realizes that she is catapulted and even more deeply mired into the traditional way of life. As she is brought up in Onitsha, she is unprepared for such a life. She is terrified when she hears of the custom that, “Any man could cut off a lock of hair from a girl’s head and make her his wife forever”. As this is a legally sanctioned custom and as there was no chance to protest it, she decides to shave off every last vestige of hair on her head. Ojebeta reflecting on her early days at the Palagada’s thinks that,
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 (p.112).

She deeply grieves over the shaving off of her hair. In despair she questions herself. To her,

The hair seemed to symbolize 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? (167-168).

Ofbanje realizes that though she breaks the shackles of slavery, she is not yet free. She was still a slave to the traditions and customs. This perhaps makes Emecheta comment that,

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 someone in place of her father or her older brother, and then, in general, by her group or homestead (157).
At Ibuza, Ogbanje meets Jacob Okonji "an elite among his people since he could read and write". She thinks that,

If this time she must marry and belong to a man according to the custom of her people, then she must do so with her eyes open...... it would be better to be a slave to a master of your choice, Jacob would be a better choice (168).

Thus Ojebeta decides to marry him, but her communal father, uncle Eze disapproves of her decision. He secretly plans to marry off her to his cousin by practicing the custom of cutting off a hair lock of Ojebeta. Since Ojebeta and Jacob love each other, they elope to Lagos, thereby defying the Ibuza tradition. Commenting on the marriage of Ojebeta and Jacob, Taiwo remarks, "They introduce the element of love and arrange to be man and wife by direct negotiation"5.

Emecheta, here introduces yet another myth that exists in the traditional Ibuza society which says that curse befalls on those slaves who are never really free until what was paid is refunded to their masters. That is why when Ogbanje starts to have miscarriages after having two children, the dibia advises her that her freedom must be repurchased. Later, when Clifford, son of Ma Palagada, a one-time admirer of Ogbanje, comes to claim her as a slave, he gets astonished on seeing her, because, "Once a lively, intelligent girl, as now a nervous woman, with lustreless air ... unsure of herself and her unbecoming outfit".(176-178).
At the end of the novel, Ogbanje Ojebeta willfully accepts the reality of the fascisizing myths of her tradition and her husband, Jacob, happily pays off Clifford the amount for which she was first sold.

Katherine Frank at this turn of events observes that, "Ojebeta herself is too defeated, too cowed to be fully aware of, much less rail against her abasement". Emecheta tells that it is pointless to speculate whether Jacob and Ojebeta loved each other ever after, and the description of their marital relationship expresses a touch of bitterness:

...These words make no sense in a situation like this...
There was certainly a kind of eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced may be by centuries of traditions, taboos ......... 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 (173-174).

After Jacob purchases Ojebeta formally from Clifford, she kneels before him, saying, "Thankyou, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master" (179).

Commenting on the critical and pitiable condition of Ojebeta, Lloyd Brown says that, "Women like Ojebeta are their own worst enemies".
The greatest irony of Ojebeta’s story is that, in spite of the compensations of her life with the Palagadas, she never acquiesces in her slavery with them but when she voluntarily chooses Jacob as the master of her own choice, she seals her doom. Moreover Chiago is happy and contended with the opportunistic master Pa Palagada who marries her after the death of Ma Palagada, whereas Ojebeta, who longed for freedom all time, is found just changing the forms of slavery and not freeing herself.

Emecheta concludes the novel with a bitterly ironic statement:

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 (179).

In *The Slave Girl* the slave masters, the tyrannical oppressors are all men. The slave-master motif related to the traditional marriage is found in this novel, hence *The Slave Girl* tends to be a study of the oppression of women by men.
References


2 Buchi Emecheta, *The Slave Girl*, New York, Brazillier, 1977, All further Pages numbers are to this edition.


6 Katherine Frank, p.483.