Buchi Emecheta is one of the prominent African women writers who explores the roles a woman is expected to play in a patriarchal society with great insight. She is unrivalled in her portrayal of women characters. In her novels she challenges man’s simplistic notions of woman and condemns his attempt to relegate woman to an inferior position in the society. The recurring theme in her novels, is the oppression of women in a male oriented society. She registers her disgust at male chauvinism and dissatisfaction with the oppressive system. She acts as a spokeswoman for the rights of the women in her writings.

The characterization of the female protagonists in Emecheta’s novels presents the quintessence of her views on feminism and her struggle to focus the attention of the world on certain feminist issues. She secures a vital place among the galaxy of the prominent women writers in Africa. As Lloyd W. Brown aptly remarks,

Of all women writers in the contemporary African literature, Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct feminist protest

Emecheta is successful in presenting the African womanhood from a woman’s point of view. She portrays her female characters in such a heroic way that instead of accepting their fate, they struggle to assert themselves against a variety of oppressions, there by challenging the African’s attitude towards women. The characters Adah, Akunna, Ojebeta, Nnu Ego, the
protagonists of the novels selected for study, herald the dawn of emancipation.

In Emecheta's Second Class Citizen, Adah, the protagonist of the novel, successfully fights against customs and traditions that deny her an opportunity for growth as a woman.

Adah, heralds the dawn of emancipation for African woman from the restrictive norms of conduct imposed on women in a patriarchal society. Adah becomes an orphan at a very young age. But as she possesses the positive quality of a dogged determination to rise above circumstances that stand in her way challenging her, she proves her capacity for hard work and learns to be responsible for herself. Right from her childhood she nurtures the ambition of getting being educated and dreams of achieving middle class status by going to the United Kingdom. But her sex turns out to be a major obstacle in realizing her ambition and fulfilling her dream.

In pursuit of achieving her dream, she resolves to go to school. Anyway her parents send her to school but their unexpected death threatens her stay at the school. But it is only through her dogged determination and independent spirit she is successful in continuing her studies. Adah in her adolescent age is forced to marry middle aged men because, according to her people, old men paid more bride price and took good care of their wives. Adah, unable to accept the logic of her people, marries Francis Obi, a young clerk in Lagos. Even Francis
behaves like a typical African male and exercises male authority over her. Due to the unemployment of Francis and his failure as a student her dream turns into a nightmare. The United Kingdom remains a promised land to her because of her repulsive and worthless husband.

Francis, thinking that he would get better educational and employment opportunities in the United Kingdom, proposes to go there and this news makes her ecstatic and fills her with eager anticipation. But as soon as she reaches the United Kingdom she is disappointed bitterly because of the attitude of the whites towards the blacks. Her romantic vision of the United Kingdom gradually yields place to a more realistic view of the country. Even in England Francis goes on with his authoritative behaviour. All these circumstances make her realize that women are second class human beings in any patriarchal society white or black while the blacks are second-class in a white society.

Adah however manages to get a job in a library. But it becomes difficult for her to take care of her children. She appoints Trudy, a white woman as a caretaker of her children. Francis, on the other hand, forms an extra marital relationship with Trudy. He, who is already jealous of Adah, ridicules her attempts when she tries to become a writer. He eventually destroys her manuscript. Adah's marriage with Francis finally collapses and she, pregnant with her fifth child, packs up her four children and her belongings, leaves Francis in order to live an autonomous life.
Thus she becomes autonomous woman and asserts her individuality and emerges as a self-reliant woman.

Education happens to be crucial liberating force in the lives of Emecheta's heroines. Emecheta has no faith in social change or in the prospect that the environment will ever grant freedom to the African women. She believes that the women themselves should wrest it from the environment. Among all the heroines of Emecheta, Adah is portrayed as the most autonomous and fulfilled. Adah in both the Novels, *In the Ditch* and *second class citizen* is university educated and challenges the oppressive system and gender bias. If Adah is the most powerful heroine, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* is the most powerless and oppressed heroine. Though she realises the need for education, she is caught in a helpless situation. In *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta shows the very rudiments of education and the profound effect that even such learning can have on the women's lives. In the *Second Class Citizen* education becomes the route to self knowledge. Akunna in *The Bride Price* is the traditional woman who resists her fate for a period of time, because of the education she gets.

*The Bride Price* offers a study of the relationship between the collective traditions of the communal will and Akunna's own strength or weakness of will. Akunna after the death of her father completely becomes an orphan. Anyway she is given the opportunity to be educated. Her uncle has his own selfish motto behind allowing her to go to school. He hopes that
if she is well educated, she would fetch a lot of money as bride price. Since the Ibuza boys have a fancy for educated girls they would pay more bride price. Akunna falls in love with Chike, her school teacher. It is Chike who encourages her to study well. He even advises her not to tell her family about her attainment of maturity until she finishes the examinations. But the secret is disclosed and is known to everybody. Meanwhile Akunna is kidnapped by Okoboshi forcefully. Even her family agrees to her marriage with her abductor. Akunna who hates Okoboshi taunts him and escapes from his clutches by saying that she was already disvirgined by Chike. Chike rescues her in time and they elope to Ughelli. This results in the defiance of the taboo, tradition, and custom of her society.

Akunna marries Chike without the customary bride price and attracts the anger of her family. Chike and Akunna establish a true marriage and comfortable home. Akunna becomes a teacher and Chike the manager of an oil company. Though Chike’s father offers to pay the bride price, Okonkwo Akunna’s uncle spitefully refuses to accept it. Instead he turns to black magic, makes a voodoo doll in the image of Akunna and pierces it with a needle. Akunna begins to hear her uncle’s voice calling her back home. Meanwhile she becomes pregnant at the age of sixteen and she is too weak and young to give birth to a child. Moreover from her childhood she was referred to as ‘Ogbanje’ because she often fell sick. The superstition that, any woman who marries without the payment of bride price does not survive the birth of her first born, runs through her mind. All these claim her as a victim and she dies giving birth to a girl. The people of Ibuza
take it as an opportunity to intimidate the women by quoting her as an example.

Inspite of Akunna's strength of will, her education, and her bravery, she is ultimately destroyed because of her belief in the superstitions. At the same time her years of malnutrition, young age, and the mental toll on her cannot be neglected. Emecheta in *The Bride Price* fully explores enslavement and degradation of women through rigidly enforced rules of conduct and social and religious taboos.

The novel, *The Slave Girl* is a fictionalized biography of Emecheta's mother. It is the study of the oppression of women by men. It is the most overtly feminist of all of Emecheta's books. In *The Slave Girl* the slave masters, the tyrannical oppressors are all men. The protagonist of the novel, Ogbanje Ojebeta is the only female child to her parents. Unlike the other parents who get disappointed in the birth of a female child, Ojebeta's parents cherish the birth of their child. They lavish love and affection on their precious daughter. But this fortunate state of affairs does not last long for Ojebeta. Her happiness abruptly ends because of the unfortunate death of her parents when she is seven years old.

Ojebeta's brother Okolie selfishly reasons that a young bachelor like him has nothing to do with a young sister of merely seven years of age and sells her to a distant relative and a wealthy trader, Ma Palagada. Small, innocent Ogbanje races through the market to save herself in vain.
Okelie, representing the tradition which confers on men total power over all females, mercilessly sells Ojebeta into slavery for the price of a silk head tie, bells, and cowrie shells needed for his cultural coming-of-age dance.

Ojebeta gradually accepts her fate of slavery. She forms close relationship with the other slaves and treats Ma Palagada as a foster mother. In the palatial house of the Palagadas Ojebeta receives the rudiments of education. She had plenty to eat and nice clothes to wear. Inspite of all such privileges, the slave girls are often sexually harassed by Ma Palagada's husband and son. The slave girls had to bear all this in silence because they had no body to report about their sufferings. Ojebeta begins to long for freedom from this servitude. Though Ma Palagada is a kind lady, she never bothers to interfere with the sexual harassment of the slave girls.

Ojebeta frees herself from the slavery after the death of Ma Palagada. For the first time she raises the voice of protest when she is asked to go with the daughter of Ma Palagada. She goes back to Ibuza. But even at Ibuza she is not free, she feels that she is bound by the traditions and customs of the society. She realizes that, all her life a woman belonged to some male and she is not free unless she commits the abominable sin of prostitution.

Ojebeta falls in love with Jacob, a little learned man. She elopes with him and they marry. Even then she is not free, she is more
deeply mired into the circumstances. When Clifford, the son of Ma Palagada comes to claim Ojebeta as their slave, he is surprised to see her in such a situation because, the once young and beautiful Ojebeta was now reduced to a broken and helpless woman. At the end of the novel, Jacob formally purchases Ojebeta from Clifford and becomes her new master. Thus Ojebeta changes from one form of slavery into another. The greatest irony of Ojebeta is that she seals her doom when she voluntarily chooses her master.

Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood presents a vivid picture of womanhood and motherhood in the traditional African society, which confines the woman to cooking, providing comfort to her husband and bearing children. Nnu Ego the protagonist of the novel, is the daughter of Agbadi and his mistress, Ona. Agbadi gets her married to Amatokwu and her misfortune starts from this point of her marriage. She fails to conceive and proves to be barren. Amatokwo brutally treats her for such a failure and marries a second time. Nnu Ego unable to suppress her motherly instincts develops the habit of breast feeding the baby of her husband's second wife. She is caught by her husband while doing so and is sent back to her father. Her father this time chooses Nnaife at Lagos for her second husband. Nnu Ego is horrified to see Nnaife first but she comforts herself, hoping to be fertile and productive at least this time. Her dream comes true, she conceives in no time and delivers a baby boy and proves to the world that she is no more barren. But the unheralded death of her son drives her to attempt suicide. She is rescued in time and is brought back. An African woman is
deadly better off dead than being childless and this feeling makes her to attempt to kill herself. Later Nnu Ego becomes the mother of eight children of whom seven are living.

Nnu Ego, though has a contempt for her husband's job begins to love him for making her a mother. She some how manages to make both ends meet even during the absence of her husband. It becomes even hard to her when Nnaife inherits all his elder brother's wives on the latter's death which ensures both sexual and economic provision for the wives within the traditional setup. Nnu Ego is caught in such a position that she cannot protest against such a tradition. Hence it becomes inevitable for her to accept Adaku, who comes to live with them.

It really becomes a tall order to Nnu Ego to feed and educate her children. She realizes that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children. On the other hand, her children bring nothing but disaster to her. All her hopes laid on her children, especially her sons, slowly begin to evaporate into nothing. Even her husband blames her for the behaviour of her children. Nnu Ego begins to see how motherhood is used by the patriarchal society to keep women relatively powerless. Through her experiences with her husband and sons, she understands the patriarchal nature of her culture and her own role in perpetuating it.

Instead of rejoicing in her motherhood that she had longed for so much, she yearns for freedom. She understands the pains involved in motherhood. But she is unable to emancipate from all these bondages she
finally dies on the roadside with no child to hold her hand. Her sons who
neglect her during her life time give her the greatest funeral that Ibuza has
ever seen. A shrine is built for her. But she does not answer the prayers of
the infertile women, because she knew that whether fertile or barren, the life
of a woman is doomed to fail and there were only pains but not joys in
motherhood.

By juxtaposing Nnu Ego’s expectations with her actual experiences as a
mother Emecheta makes it clear that women should realize that they can
be liberated only when they reject the patriarchal glorification of motherhood.

The feminist narrative in Emecheta’s novels would seem to conclude
with the liberated and self sufficient heroines of Emecheta “with each
succeeding novel, moving progressively backward” and this proceeds on
several levels. The historical background in *The Joys of Motherhood, The
Bride Price,* and *The Slave Girl* gradually moves backward from 1960s to
fifties, forties, and finally to the early decades. Emecheta portrays the
different stages of the African woman’s life cycle. She portrays the infancy
and childhood in *The Slave Girl,* adolescence in *The Bride Price* and
marriage and motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood.* Buchi Emecheta
through the portrayals of Adah , Akunna, Ogbanje Ojebeta, and Nnu Ego is
committed to heighten the consciousness of the African Woman.